

Evaluation Report: DC Freedom Schools 2019-20



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Executive Summary

The Children’s Defense Fund 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 third year of a 3-year grant and describes the implementation and outcomes of the DC Freedom Schools’ after-school and summer programs for children attending Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools in 2019-20. The evaluation also included summer programming for children attending J.C. Nalle Community School and Excel Academy for Girls, with support from the Washington DC mayor’s office.



While the after-school program experienced challenges in recruiting and maintaining participating scholars throughout the school year, DC Freedom Schools faced its greatest challenge in the COVID-19 public health crisis which closed all DC Public Schools and schools nationally in March 2020. As the public schools struggled to deliver their instructional program through distance learning, DC Freedom Schools (and other after-school programs)¹ strived to meet families and children’s most immediate needs first and then to develop a distance enrichment program that could be delivered online to those scholars and families they were able to reach. Serving 95 children when schools were shut down in March, DC Freedom Schools was able to reconnect with the families of 36 children and ultimately able to engage 16 scholars in online sessions during April and May. While school closures cut short any evaluation data collection efforts, the evaluator was able to interview and survey staff and staff were able to interview parents and their children. Consequently we learned of program implementation challenges, successes, and the positive effects of working in such a program on staff.

The impact of COVID-19 continued with the design and implementation of the DC Freedom Schools Summer program. With school sites still closed and public health guidelines restricting in-person community activities, program staff members were able to draw upon lessons learned from distance enrichment in April–May and develop an online summer program. While registering 93 children, fewer children actually participated in any program activities and ultimately 22 children were regular participants in the 6-week summer program. Again evaluation data collection was somewhat curtailed. Still, through staff interviews, staff surveys, and child surveys, we were able to pinpoint the implementation challenges and successes. The evaluation data suggest that the program had a positive impact on the children who participated and on the Servant Leader Interns who staffed the program.

The experiences of the 2019-20 DC Freedom Schools after-school and summer programs also suggest recommendations for future programming, especially as the DC Public Schools continue with a virtual learning model into school year 2020-21. These recommendations fall in the areas of staff training, parent engagement, distance enrichment, coordination with DCPS, and access to program materials.

¹ See Corey, Mitchell, *COVID-19 Has Left Thousands of After-School Programs in Jeopardy*, in [Education Week](#), July 27, 2020.

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Introduction

Communities continue to explore the best ways to support children after school and during the summer to enhance the impact of traditional classroom education. 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, primarily after school and in the summer.

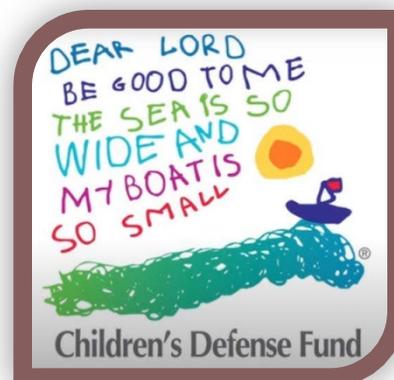
The Children's Defense Fund has provided summer and after-school programs since 1995 and currently supports Freedom Schools programs in 28 states and the District of Columbia. Through their program model they strive to empower youth to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves, their families, and communities.

The program endeavors to enhance children's motivation to read and their attitudes about learning by exposing them to a research-based 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. The program focuses on enriching the whole child, by providing children and families access to the following services:

- High quality academic enrichment through a research-based, multicultural, social justice and conflict resolution curriculum (Integrated Reading Curriculum);
- Parent and family development through weekly parent meetings, frequent family check-ins, and engagement opportunities;
- Civic engagement through lessons about social action and participation in civic events; and
- Nutrition and physical and mental health by sharing resources for accessing food, 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.

In September 2017 the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) received a three-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 2019-20 DC Freedom Schools after-school and summer programs, serving children and families from two DC Public Schools: Lawrence Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools. The evaluation of the summer 2020 program also includes children from two other DC Public Schools: J.C. Nalle Community School and Excel Academy for Girls, through additional funding from the Washington DC Mayor's Office. It is important to note that due to the COVID-19 public health crisis, DC Public Schools moved to a virtual instructional model in March 2020 and both the DC Freedom Schools after-school and summer programs went virtual,



becoming a distance enrichment program for April and May, 2020 and an online summer program June – August 2020.

Theoretical Framework

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 programs²:

1. Goal setting, strong management and sustainability
2. Quality staffing
3. Attention to safety, health and nutrition issues;
4. Effective partnerships with CBOs, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement and youth groups
5. Strong involvement of families
6. Enriching learning opportunities
7. Linkages between school-day and after-school personnel
8. Monthly program activities and timeline
9. Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness.

CDF has incorporated these characteristics in its DC Freedom School program model, as illustrated in Table 1 on the following page.

Evaluation Design

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-day and after-school personnel; and
- Monthly program activities and timeline.

And in light of the program's sudden shift in March 2020 from a site-based after-school program to a virtual distance enrichment program and a summer online program, the evaluation perspective adjusted to capture the challenges and lessons learned from this virtual program experiment. This suggested a responsive evaluation approach (Stake, 2003) that is more qualitative in nature in order to describe the virtual implementation of the programs' primary components.

² USED, *Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-School Programs* (April, 2000).

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 |
|--|--|
| 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 school campuses by staff with thorough background checks; children are served nutritious after-school 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, and juvenile detention facilities to offer their programs at no cost to participants. In 2019-20, DC Freedom Schools partnered with HBCUs (e.g., Howard University) and CBOs (e.g., Urban Alliance) to provide SLIs and businesses (e.g., Freddie Mac) to provide student laptops. |
| 5. Strong family involvement | Program includes activities for parents (e.g., book clubs, parenting & family literacy workshops) and whole family events (e.g., educational field trips); parents are surveyed on program priorities & 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) and STEM-themed field trips and guest speakers. |
| 7. Linkages between school-day and after-school personnel | Program staff members (SLIs and site coordinators) work with after-school coordinators at each school site. |
| 8. Monthly program activities and timeline | Program follows a weekly schedule for students with different activities each day of the week and offers quarterly activities for parents. |
| 9. Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness | The three-year program has included a proposed evaluation plan; collection of student, parent and staff outcome data; and evaluation reports on program implementation and effectiveness. |

The evaluation of this after-school and summer program was originally designed to meet the 21st CCLC grant requirements with a primary focus on student, family and staff outcomes. The evaluator was brought in to study the program once schools had shut down and the after-school component had transitioned to virtual delivery. Consequently the focus of the evaluation shifted with less emphasis on

outcomes and more emphasis on implementation challenges and successes. The primary purpose of the evaluation became identifying the challenges of implementing after-school and summer programs virtually, the lessons learned, and how best to meet these challenges with effective program practices. This evaluation thus became primarily qualitative in nature and included the following data sources:

- Review of **staff training and curriculum materials**;
- **Observations** of virtual after-school and summer program sessions;
- **Interviews with program staff** (director, site coordinators, interns) at the end of both the after-school and summer program components;
- **Interviews with program participants** (students and parents) at the end of the after-school program component (n=19);
- **Surveys of program staff** (site coordinators, interns) at the end of both the after-school and summer program components;
- Program **attendance**; and
- **A child survey of character skills** (academic engagement, self-empowerment, civic engagement, conflict resolution) taken during the school year and at the end of the summer program.

The results of the evaluation are presented in two parts:

1. The after-school program, including the site-based component from October 2019 to March 2020 and the distance enrichment component in April–May 2020; and
2. The summer program, an online enrichment program delivered June–August 2020.

2019-20 After-School Program

Program Overview

In summer 2019 CDF brought in a new program director for the DC Freedom Schools to lead the development and implementation of its 2019-20 after-school programs at Plummer and Boone Elementary Schools, the DC Public Schools serving city Wards 7 and 8. With the approval and cooperation of each school's principal, families and their grade 1–5 children were recruited to participate in an after-school program available at the school sites daily from school dismissal at 3 pm until 5:30 pm, October 2019 through May 2020. The program followed a weekly schedule that included the following components:

- Harambee!³ opening, a lively gathering designed to provide children with a sense of community, a can-do attitude, and excitement about learning;
- A nutritious snack to energize scholars;
- Literacy Block, the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) featuring books at four instructional levels with culturally relevant stories and strong characters to



³ **Harambee** is a Kenyan tradition of community self-help events, e.g. education, fundraising or development activities. *Harambee* literally means "all pull together" in Swahili.

capture the interest of elementary school children and motivate this empowered spirit;

- Homework assistance and tutoring as needed to support DCPS instruction;
- Academic enrichment activities such as field trips to support STEM;
- Personal enrichment activities (e.g., yoga, dance, mediation) to support mental and physical well-being; and
- Parent and family engagement activities held quarterly (e.g., a book club featuring *The Power of Presence*).

Groups were organized by grade level and staffed at a 10:1 ratio with Servant Leader Interns (SLIs), typically college students who had previous experience working with children and had completed CDF's national Freedom Schools' training and local training specific to the DC Freedom Schools. Each school site was managed by a Site Coordinator. CDF was successful in recruiting 46 Boone students and 49 Plummer students. Demographic profiles of the DC Freedom Schools' participants are shown in Table 2.⁴

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Boone and Plummer DC Freedom Schools' Participants

| Characteristics | Boone (N=46) | Plummer (N=49) |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Grade Level | Grade 1 – 32.6% Grade 2 – 19.6% Grade 3 – 23.9% Grade 4 – 23.9% Grade 5 – 0% | Grade 1 – 18.4% Grade 2 – 10.2% Grade 3 – 24.5% Grade 4 – 34.7% Grade 5 – 12.2% |
| Gender | Female – 61% Male – 39% | Female – 57% Male – 43% |
| Economic Status | 100% Economically Disadvantaged | 100% Economically Disadvantaged |
| Race/Ethnicity | Black – 98% Hispanic – 2% | Black – 96% Hispanic – 4% |

Literacy Profile of Program Participants

One of the primary components of the DC Freedom Schools is CDF's Integrated Reading Curriculum. IRC is intended to complement DCPS reading instruction with time to read and discuss high-interest books that provide students an opportunity to practice their reading skills with materials designed to enhance their motivation to read and increase their awareness of culturally relevant and relatable heroes/heroines and topics. Judging from the most recently available PARCC English-Language Arts scores (May 2019), the vast majority of DC Freedom Schools participants likely did not meet grade level expectations in reading. In May 2019 82% of Boone students and 77% of Plummer students in grades 3-5 tested below grade level expectations in reading on the PARCC-ELA.

In previous years, CDF has administered the Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 2012) to measure gains in instructional reading levels during the school year and summer programs. The BRI assesses sight word

⁴ This is the number of students on the active program roster in March 2020. From October to March, the number of participants varied from week to week. This variation is discussed with the attendance findings.

recognition, fluency and comprehension to determine instructional reading level. This test was given to a one-third sample of DC Freedom scholars at Boone and Plummer during the 2019-20 school year with the intention of repeating the assessment at the end of the school year to gauge improvement. When COVID-19 closed schools in March 2020, the evaluation was unable to administer a BRI post-test. Still the BRI results are instructive, showing a higher percentage of students testing on or above grade level than would be expected based on the PARCC-ELA results from the previous year. This comparison is shown in Figures 1 and 2 for Boone and Plummer students.

Figure 1. Boone Reading Profile: Results of PARCC-ELA and Basic Reading Inventory (BRI)

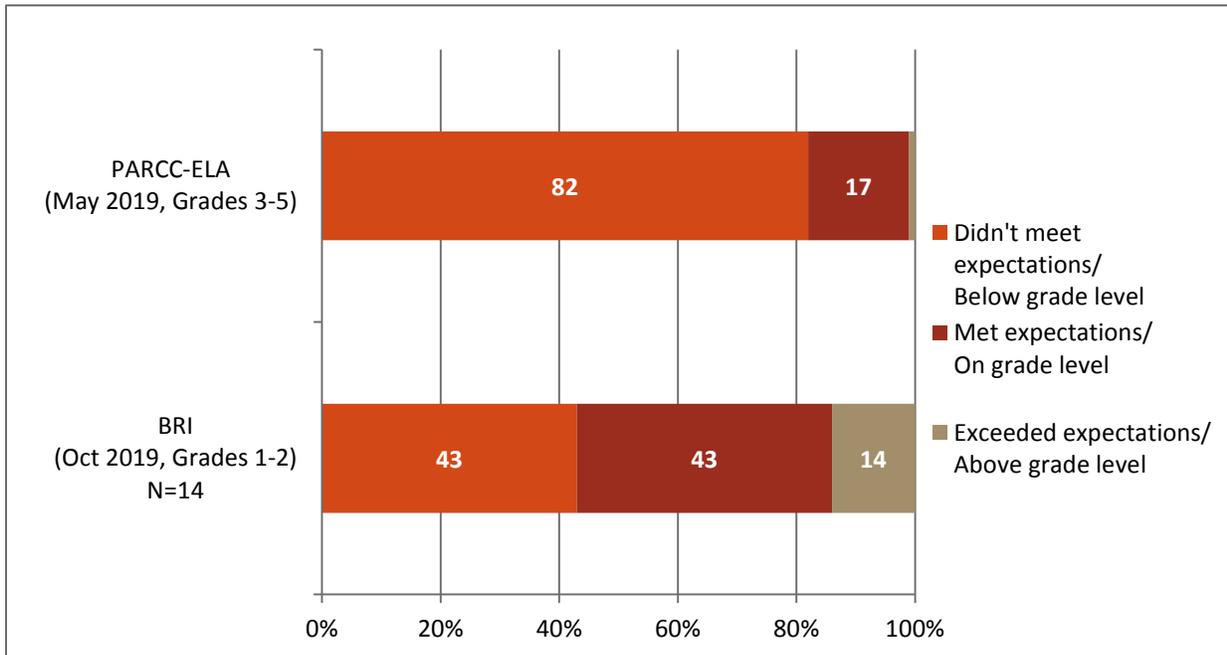
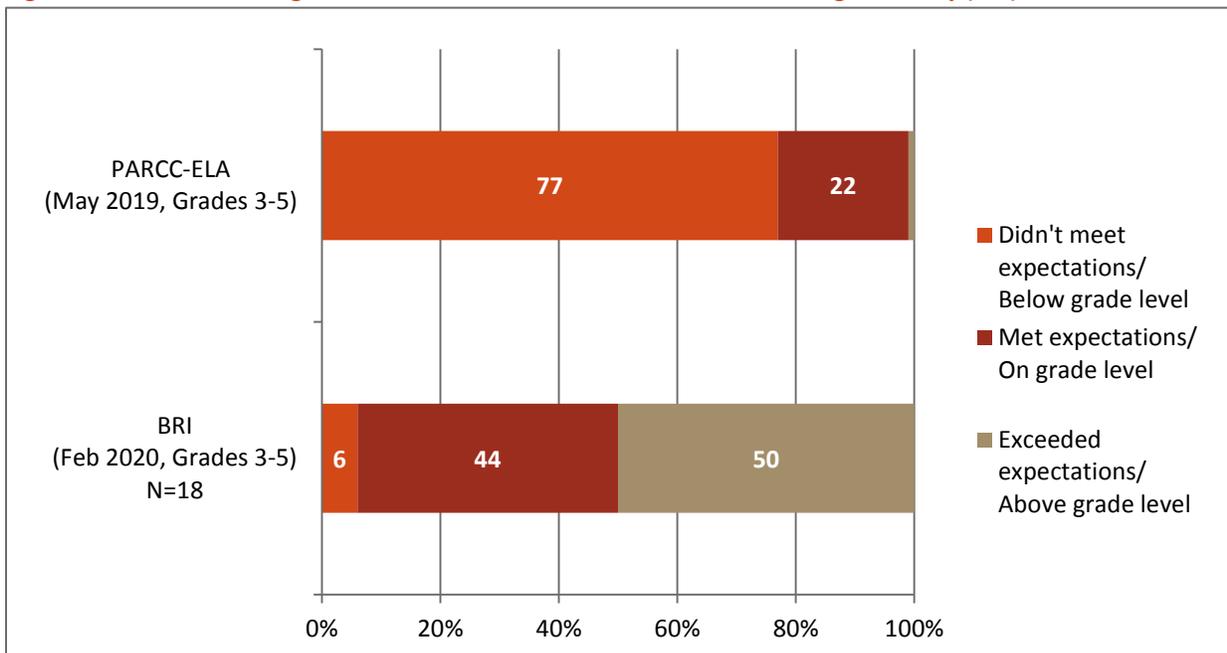


Figure 2. Plummer Reading Profile: Results of PARCC-ELA and Basic Reading Inventory (BRI)



Rather than indicating that DC Freedom Schools participants had better than expected reading skills, a more plausible explanation is that PARCC-ELA is measuring a more difficult reading standard based on what a child can read *independently*, while the BRI is capturing an easier standard, a child's *instructional* reading level.

Program Enrollment and Attendance

Student attendance reflects whether a program is being implemented as intended (implementation measure) as well as whether the program is effective (outcome measure). Under the 21st CCLC grant enrollment was projected at 50 students for each of the Boone and Plummer sites. After-school programs ideally are able to recruit students and their families when schools begin in early September. The 21st CCLC grant funds are distributed on the federal fiscal calendar, beginning October 1 of each year, thus dictating that programs are not able to provide after-school services until at least a month after school starts. This funding start date puts the DC Freedom Schools at a disadvantage as they compete with other after-school programs which start the first week of school. Consequently the enrollments at Boone and Plummer started at about 30 students each in October 2019. During quarter 1 (October – December) and quarter 2 (January – March), enrollment exceeded 60 students at Boone and reached 49 students at Plummer. The active rosters of the Boone and Plummer programs included 46 and 49 students respectively in March 2020 when the schools were closed due to COVID-19.

The 21st CCLC grant requires programs submit quarterly Interim Performance Reviews which include projected and actual attendance for each program site. Projected attendance is the number of children the program planned to enroll, in this case 50 students at each school site. Actual attendance is computed based on average daily attendance (ADA) which is the ratio of total days present (days per student) to total days absent and present (again days per student). ADA takes into account the different start and end dates for students as they enter and leave the program. Based on these calculations, CDF reported that the Boone program averaged 42 and 41 students in attendance during quarters 1 and 2, while the Plummer program averaged only 27 and 32 students in attendance during these same quarters.

Examining the daily attendance data for each program suggests a more complex picture regarding student participation in the two school sites. While some attendance data for Boone students was missing, it appears that enrollment there varied from October to March, starting at about 30 students in October, growing to about 50 students in January and including as many as 63 different students over the 6-month period. Boone's active roster included 46 students when schools shut down in mid-March. Plummer's enrollment appears more stable, also starting at about 30 students in October, growing to about 40 students in January and including 49 different students over the same 6-month period. Plummer's active roster still included 49 students when schools closed in mid-March.

In considering enrollment and attendance data for after-school programs, we should keep in mind that there were other activities offered in the community during after-school hours such as sports teams and dance lessons. And these school communities tend to be somewhat mobile or transient in nature with families moving in and out of the community throughout the school year. These circumstances resulted in the enrollment and attendance variations seen in the roster data with some students attending the DC Freedom Schools program only part-time. From the perspective of program impact, it is most useful to consider those students who were in attendance on a regular basis (at least 50% of days in session). For example, at both Boone and Plummer there were 38 students who attended at

least 23 of the 45 days the program met from January to March. These are the students for whom the program would be expected to have the greatest impact.

DCPS Shutdown and Distance Enrichment

The most significant factor in implementing the 2019-20 DC Freedom Schools program was the closure of schools in mid-March due to the COVID-19 public health crisis. With little forewarning DCPS, all DC metro area school districts in Maryland and Virginia, and schools across the country decided to shut down, most either on March 13 or March 16, shortly before scheduled spring breaks. DCPS, like most school districts across the country, took a few weeks to determine next steps and set up distance learning for students. While middle and high school students had DCPS laptops, the availability of laptops for elementary students varied by school as did internet access.⁵ As DCPS worked to provide meals, computers and internet access to support a distance learning program, DC Freedom Schools used the last two weeks of March to reach out to the families of rostered students, determine their most immediate needs and design a distance enrichment program to support students during the late afternoon hours.

The biggest challenge was reconnecting with families. For some families neither DCPS nor the DC Freedom Schools had up-to-date contact information. Some families moved to deal with more pressing needs brought on by the public health crisis (e.g., food insecurity, unemployment). After two weeks of phone calls, texts, emails and community outreach, DC Freedom Schools was able to contact parents of 36 of the 95 children on the active Boone and Plummer rosters. They realized the importance of first meeting families' most basic needs and delivered care packages of fresh produce, clothing, bedding, IRC books and school supplies via neighborhood parades (dressed as super heroes). These parades helped connect with and engage families. They also were able to obtain a few tablets and laptops for scholars through community donations. DC Freedom Schools quickly designed a distance enrichment program that included one-on-one tutoring, virtual field trips, engaging games and family projects, all delivered via Zoom. Students could log in Monday – Wednesday afternoons 3 – 6 pm for virtual activities, and sign up on Thursdays for individual tutoring sessions. Fridays were set aside for the DC Freedom School site coordinators and SLIs to debrief the week's virtual sessions, plan new activities and troubleshoot challenges, for example the lack of appropriate personal computing devices and the difficulty engaging students in activities in a Zoom call on a cell phone.

Table 3 provides a profile of the 33 children who were assigned an SLI and received any services from DC Freedom Schools during April and May when schools were closed.

While staff maintained weekly check-ins with each family, student engagement remained a challenge with only 16 different scholars, primarily from Boone, actually

Table 3. Demographic Profile of DC Freedom Schools' Distance Enrichment Participants (April-May, 2020)

| Characteristics | Boone (N=20) | Plummer (N=13) |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Grade Level | Grade 1 - 7 | Grade 1 - 1 |
| | Grade 2 - 4 | Grade 2 - 1 |
| | Grade 3 - 5 | Grade 3 - 5 |
| | Grade 4 - 4 | Grade 4 - 4 |
| | Grade 5 - 0 | Grade 5 - 2 |
| Gender | Female - 11 | Female - 7 |
| | Male - 9 | Male - 6 |

⁵ Based on the absence of DCPS laptops for participating scholars, it did not appear that DCPS had distributed laptops to students at Boone and Plummer before the end of the school year on May 29.

participating in any of the online sessions: 7 scholars received one-on-one tutoring, 4 scholars attended virtual field trips held in conjunction with the National Center for Children and Families, and 8 scholars participated in the Monday – Wednesday virtual enrichment activities.

Implementation Challenges

The DC Freedom Schools after-school program experienced several challenges, some during October – March when the program was meeting in Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools and especially after schools shut down and the program resumed as a distance enrichment experience. These challenges, as discussed in interviews with program staff (the director, site coordinators and SLIs) in May 2019, were cited in the following areas:

- **Staffing and training.** The Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) are recruited from local colleges in the fall for the after-school program and in the spring for the summer program. The position requires at least one year of college, a 2.5 GPA, and prior experience working with children. Most SLIs major in an area related to mentoring children such as education or social work. CDF provides a one-week national training in March and again in June (in 2020 this training was virtual) that covers social-emotional learning, child development, classroom management and the Integrated Reading Curriculum. For those interns hired in the fall of 2019, the DC Freedom School director condensed the national training into 3 days in preparation for the after-school program. Still, it was difficult to maintain staff during the school year as SLIs juggled their college student responsibilities and there was some staff turnover. Of the 8 SLIs and 2 site coordinators hired to staff the 2019-20 after-school program, 5 SLIs and 2 site coordinators remained with the program when the schools shut down in mid-March. When asked about their experience as an SLI, staff cited the need for additional training in classroom management, reading instruction and distance learning and mentioned staff turnover as a challenge in maintaining stable scholar groupings during the school year. Staff members also highlighted the importance of recruiting SLIs who are passionate about working with children and have a strong voice in the classroom.
- **Coordination with host elementary schools.** Ideally after-school programs are aligned with the school-day instructional program and staff members are able to coordinate with classroom teachers to best meet the needs of each individual scholar. DC Freedom Schools formalized a partnership with each host elementary school and shared its schedule and staffing plan with the respective principals and after-school coordinators. Still, it is difficult to sustain these partnerships as classroom teachers typically leave at dismissal and are not available to coordinate or collaborate with after-school program staff. DC Freedom Schools staff were able to coordinate the use of school space and plan some events with the host schools (e.g., around anti-bullying), more so at Boone than Plummer, but instructional staff from the school-day and after-school programs generally were not able to work together.
- **Student engagement.** As the attendance data indicate, it was a challenge to recruit and maintain enrollment and regular attendance for 50 scholars at each DC Freedom School site. Some children attended part-time or arrived late to make time for other after-school activities like sports and dance classes. Parents asked that more time be allotted to homework completion. These circumstances made it difficult to dedicate adequate time for students to engage in the Integrated Reading Curriculum.

- **Parent and family engagement.** While DC Freedom Schools had originally planned for quarterly parent meetings, the program director found these meetings too infrequent to maintain parent participation. SLIs reported that it was challenging to maintain connections with parents both during the site-based program and when the program shifted to distance enrichment. In Fall 2020 the program plans to hold monthly parent meetings and activities.
- **Distance enrichment.** With the sudden closure of schools, it was difficult to reach families and many did not have the appropriate devices or internet access to effectively participate in Zoom calls. It also became increasingly difficult to keep students engaged in online activities late in the afternoon, regardless of whether they were still involved in school. The SLIs reported needing a wider variety of activities that could be done via Zoom to keep scholars interested.

Implementation Successes

Despite these program implementation challenges, staff and parents cited many program successes during the 2019-20 school year.

- **Homework time.** Parents appreciated that their children had monitored support to complete their homework after school and requested increasing the time from 30 to 60 minutes in the program's first month.
- **Physical enrichment activities.** The scholars especially enjoyed the physical or movement activities that the SLIs were able to incorporate into the after-school sessions (e.g., karate, dance, Zumba), as well as any hands-on activities (e.g., the airplane project with the STEM visitors).
- **Integrated Reading Curriculum.** Staff reported that the scholars liked the Freedom Schools books because they could relate to the stories and characters, with multiple recommendations for *The Juice Box Bully* and *Happy Hair*. Scholars also enjoyed the extra time devoted to reading during D.E.A.R. (*Drop Everything and Read*). Staff reported that their scholars became more comfortable and confident in their reading.⁶ Parents cited reading as among their child's favorite Freedom School activities and reported that their child's interest in reading had increased and reading skills had improved during the program. Many staff attend HBCUs and are able to effectively infuse Black history into the reading lessons.
- **Harambee!** Staff reported that the energy of Harambee got students engaged and energized for each day's after-school activities. And Harambee was frequently cited by parents as a favorite activity of their children.



⁶ In previous years, DC Freedom Schools has measured scholar's growth in instructional reading levels with the Basic Reading Inventory. Because of the program's move to distance learning in April, the program was not able to administer the post-test. The results of the pre-test were included in the Boone and Plummer literacy profiles (page 8).

- Distance enrichment.** While the sudden shift from in-person to distance enrichment was a major challenge in delivering an effective after-school program, staff and parents reported that the Freedom Parade to deliver care packages, the one-on-one tutoring, the virtual field trips, the whole family activities, and just being able to see a familiar SLI face on Zoom . . . that these aspects of the distance enrichment program were seen as most successful. And among the 19 families interviewed in May, most reported that their child had read 4-5 books since schools closed and 7 families reported more than 5 books.

Parent: *“The best part about the virtual program is that you’re staying connected with the students.”*

Parent: *“I [appreciated] . . . the loving care provided while kids were in class and during COVID-19.”*
- Child behavior.** DC Freedom Schools places a strong emphasis on building effective relationships between SLIs and their scholars to promote social-emotional learning and strengthen character skills. Many scholars faced behavioral challenges during the school day and needed a safe environment to behave appropriately. SLIs encouraged scholars to be their best selves each day. Over the course of the 6-month program, staff saw positive social-emotional growth in many of the scholars, both in their attitudes toward each other and in their respect for staff. Parents reported that their children were more focused, motivated and confident after participating in DC Freedom Schools ⁷

Parent: *“I loved the book parade and how they have different things for kids to do.”*

Parent: *“My scholar was really excited about **going** every day. She was learning new and exciting things.”*

In addition to the implementation successes above, there is some evidence that the summer program had positive impacts on the site coordinators and SLIs who staffed the program.

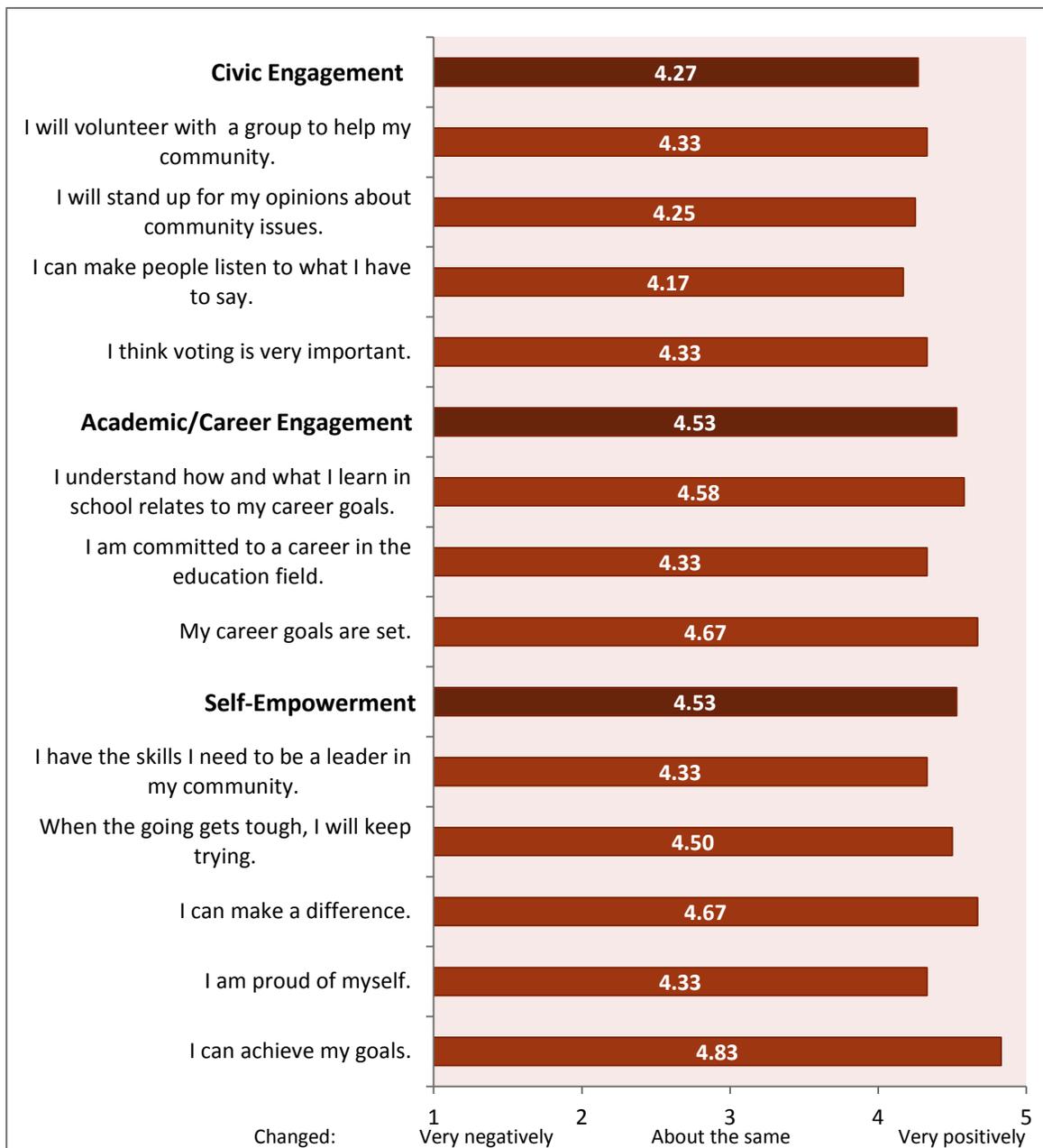
Positive Impact on Staff

One of the goals of CDF Freedom Schools is to promote the character skills of the Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) through both staff training and their experience working with underperforming children who live in poverty. Similar to its work with children, the program strives to foster in its interns a sense of empowerment, a focus on academic and career pursuits, and civic responsibility. Program staff members were surveyed during the last week of May on the extent to which their experience as an SLI had changed their attitude about statements reflecting three character traits: self-empowerment, academic/career engagement, and civic engagement.⁸ Six out of the seven SLIs and site coordinators still working with the program during distance enrichment completed the survey. The majority of respondents showed a positive change on each of the 12 survey items (see Figure 3).

⁷ In previous years, DC Freedom Schools has administered a Child Survey to measure growth in scholar’s character skills from fall to spring. Because of the move to distance learning in April, the program was unable to administer the post-survey. The results of the pre-Child Survey can be found in Appendix B.

⁸ Survey items were designed to measure these three traits. A factor analysis conducted on similarly-worded items in a national survey of Freedom School SLIs during summer 2020 confirmed the survey’s conceptual framework.

Figure 3. Post-program Staff Attitudes: Mean Ratings on Positive/Negative Change Scale (N=6 staff)



Reflecting on their school year staff experience, 67 to 100% of respondents indicated that their attitude had changed positively or very positively across the 12 survey items. More detailed results:

- The item showing the greatest impact with the highest average rating on a five-point change scale⁹ was: *I can achieve my goals* (4.83, 100% positive change).

⁹ The five-point Likert scale used for this survey: 5=Changed very positively, 4=Changed positively, 3=About the same, 2=Changed negatively, and 1=Changed very negatively.

- The item showing the least impact on this same five-point change scale was: *I can make people listen to what I have to say* (4.17, 67% positive change).
- Overall, the survey showed that the program had a positive impact on the staff's feelings about self-empowerment (4.53), academic/ career engagement (4.53), and civic engagement (4.27).

Interviews were conducted during the last week of the program with the seven staff members who implemented both the site-based and distance enrichment components of the after-school program. These SLIs and site coordinators most frequently reported that their program experience had increased their confidence, specifically in their abilities to work with children and manage a classroom. Other impacts cited by these after-school staff included:

- Increased interest in a teaching career;
- Improved communication and leadership skills; and
- More patience with children and a better understanding of how to engage them.

2020 Summer Program

Program Overview

The 21st CCLC grant included funding for a six-week program in summer 2020 to continue serving children in grades 1-5 at Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools. In May 2020 CDF received funds from the DC Mayor's Office to expand their summer program (Summer Strong) to include children from two additional schools, J. C. Nalle Community School and Excel Academy for Girls. With COVID-19 remaining a serious public health threat, DCPS and other DC community organizations running summer programs would be closed for in-person activities, so the DC Freedom Schools director and staff designed an online summer program. Based on lessons learned from the distance enrichment experience in April and May, staff developed a summer program schedule that included:

- On Mondays, SLIs led a live Harambee! to pull together scholars working with the various SLIs for a communal gathering that set the tone for the week.
- On Mondays and Wednesdays scholars engaged in the Integrated Reading Curriculum, a multicultural, social justice-themed curriculum.
- Turn Up Tuesdays provided scholars with enrichment activities to build character and lift their spirits (e.g., Rap Battle, mediation, cooking).
- On Thursdays, staff led virtual field trips for the scholars and their families.
- On Freedom Zone Fridays, scholars and their families could pick up books and craft supplies for the next week's activities at Boone Elementary School, an outdoor event following social distancing and mask protocols.
- In addition, SLIs checked in weekly with each scholar and their parents.



The program was scheduled to run from June 29 to August 7 with 1.25 to 2.25 hours of daily activities for each individual scholar.

School Community Profiles

The school communities served by DC Freedom Schools' Summer Strong Program share characteristics of the poorest wards in Washington, DC. These profiles, seen in Table 4, feature students from low income families who are at risk of academic failure.

Table 4. Demographic Profile of Schools Participating in Summer Strong

| Demographics | Boone | Plummer | Excel Academy | J.C. Nalle |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Economically Disadvantaged | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Race/Ethnicity | 96% Black 3% Hispanic | 88% Black 12% Hispanic | 99% Black 1% Hispanic | 90% Black 10% Hispanic |
| PARCC-ELA: % met grade 3-5 expectations May 2019 | 18% | 23% | 26% | 11% |
| PARCC-Math: % met grade 3-5 expectations May 2019 | 11% | 18% | 9% | 23% |

Program Enrollment and Attendance

The Boone and Plummer communities were already familiar with DC Freedom Schools and many of the families with children in the after-school program had planned to enroll in the summer program. J.C. Nalle had been a Freedom School site in 2018-19. Based on the program's popularity with elementary school girls, the Excel Academy for Girls also agreed that their students would benefit from a summer online program. Despite the pandemic, DC Freedom Schools was able to recruit families with flyers distributed in the four school communities, Freedom parades in the neighborhoods served by these four schools, and a website that provided information about the program and registration. Parent outreach was supported by the site coordinators who had already established relationships with their respective school communities. These recruiting efforts were successful and a total of 93 children were registered online for the program. Many families signed up, however, uncertain of their summer plans. Over the course of the summer 41 different children attended at least one session of the program and 22 children were regular participants, attending at least half of the scheduled program days. This information is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Summer Program Enrollment and Attendance by School

| School | Number of Scholars | | |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | Registered | Attended Any Sessions | Regular Participant |
| Boone | 19 | 13 | 10 |
| Plummer | 11 | 7 | 3 |
| J.C. Nalle | 33 | 9 | 2 |
| Excel Academy | 30 | 12 | 7 |
| TOTAL | 93 | 41 | 22 |

While the summer program was advertised for students in grades 1 – 5, 1 kindergartener and 2 seventh graders participated as siblings of other scholars. The program continued to appeal more to girls than boys—two-thirds of the regular participants were females. All participants were of Black

race/ethnicity and from low income families, consistent with the student populations of the four school sites. See Table 6.

Table 6. Demographic Profile of Regular Summer Participants

| Characteristics | Summer Strong Regular Participants (N=22) |
|-----------------|---|
| Grade Level | Grade K – 1 Grade 1 – 5 Grade 2 – 7 Grade 3 – 0 Grade 4 – 6 Grade 5 – 1 Grade 7 – 2 |
| Gender | Female – 15 Male – 7 |
| Economic Status | Economically Disadvantaged – 100% |
| Race/Ethnicity | Black – 100% |

Staffing

Groups were organized by grade level and staffed at a maximum ratio of 10:1 with 14 Servant Leader Interns (SLIs). In addition to six returning staff from the after-school program, college students who had previous experience working with children were recruited to serve as SLIs. Two DCPS teachers also served as SLIs. All staff completed CDF’s national Freedom Schools’ training program in June (this year delivered virtually) and local training specific to the DC Freedom Schools. Individual SLIs also took responsibility for planning specific activities (e.g., enrichment activities, virtual field trips, IRC book discussions). Each school site was managed by a site coordinator with one site coordinator also serving as a Tech Coordinator to troubleshoot problems with internet access and donated laptops and to ensure that the program made optimum use of Zoom. Each SLI started with a roster of 4-13 scholars to engage in the daily virtual sessions. As the summer progressed and regular participants emerged, most SLIs teamed up and combined their rosters to provide larger group experiences for the scholars.

Implementation Challenges

In addition to the previously mentioned difficulties recruiting scholars and sustaining their participation, program staff highlighted the following challenges in implementing the summer program:

- Parent outreach and engagement.** While the neighborhood Freedom School parades were successful, it was especially difficult during a public health crisis to conduct effective parent outreach in order to recruit participants. More problematic was the lack of parent engagement during the program. DC Freedom Schools had originally planned to hold weekly parent meetings but ultimately held only one parent meeting in the program’s last week. Equally problematic was communication with parents during the program, especially around changing Zoom links, bad Wi-Fi connections and scholars not logging on for virtual sessions.
- Staff inexperience with program’s culture.** The summer 2020 SLIs were more diverse in background than in previous years and not all staff were comfortable with the cultural aspects of the program such as the Harambee chants and understanding the black experience in

discussions of Black History and current events (e.g., Black Lives Matter marches, death of John Lewis).

- **Literacy component.** While staff members were generally pleased with the implementation of the Integrated Reading Curriculum, there were some challenges in implementing a more comprehensive focus on literacy during the summer program. The original plan included 15 minutes of D.E.A.R. (*Drop Everything and Read*) time daily when students would read from books in their home library. It was difficult to maintain scholars' attention online for this extra 15 minutes, families didn't always receive the books intended for this activity and consequently DC Freedom Schools dropped D.E.A.R. and the plan for weekly reading logs.
- **Activity supplies.** Freedom Zone Fridays were designed so that scholars and their families could pick up the materials necessary for the next week's activities, following safe, socially distanced and mask protocols in an outdoor setting. SLIs attempted to deliver materials that were not picked up. Unfortunately the result was that scholars did not always have the IRC books they needed and the SLIs resorted to making slides to show the books on screen.

Implementation Successes

Despite these challenges, program staff cited several areas of success in implementing the summer program:

- **Online engagement.** While the number of scholars was smaller than expected, staff reported that those scholars who attended regularly were engaged in the virtual activities, in particular Turn Up Tuesdays which featured hands-on projects (e.g., drawing, painting) and movement activities (e.g., Zumba, Rap Battle) and IRC Mondays and Wednesdays which included reading aloud, book discussions, and book character activities.
- **Specific program components.** Staff cited the Integrated Reading Curriculum book selections¹⁰, Turn Up Tuesdays, the virtual field trips (e.g., China, African American Museum, zoo), and Freedom Zone Fridays as the most effective program elements.
- **Laptop donations.** Part way through the summer program, DC Freedom Schools was able to distribute 30 brand-new laptops to program participants, thanks to donations from Freddie Mac, a valued community partner.
- **Virtual parent meeting.** While DC Freedom Schools had originally planned for weekly parent meetings, in the end they held one virtual meeting for families during the last week of the program. This meeting was well attended and provided some



¹⁰ Multiple SLIs mentioned the following books as scholar favorites: *Those Shoes*, *Before She Was Harriett* (about Harriet Tubman), *Lillian's Right to Vote: A Celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965*, and *The Doctor with an Eye for Eyes: The Story of Dr. Patricia Bath*.

closure for the summer program and an opportunity to talk about after-school program plans for Fall 2020.

In addition to the implementation successes above, there is evidence that the summer program had positive impacts on the children who participated and on the site coordinators and SLIs who staffed the program.

SLI: *“Overall it’s a great program; it meets a great need for the community; it truly works, especially reading books that are relevant to students and that provide role models for them.”*

Positive Impact on Children

In previous evaluations, CDF has administered a national Child Survey to gauge the impact of their program on the promoted character skills: academic engagement, civic engagement, self-empowerment, and conflict resolution. This summer while the surveys could not be completed in-person, SLIs were able to have a sample of scholars complete the survey online at the end of the summer program. Items were rephrased to reflect the extent to which scholar attitudes had changed after participating in the CDF Freedom Schools summer program. Of the 22 regular DC Freedom School participants, 9 completed the survey. Results suggest a positive impact on the character skills measured by the survey, as shown in Figure 4. The respondents averaged between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale indicating agreement with items reflecting the four desired character traits: academic engagement (3.4), civic engagement (3.4), self-empowerment (3.3), and conflict resolution (3.2). Scholars scored highest on the item: *I feel more confident to achieve my goals.* (3.8) and lowest on the item: *I feel less likely to give up when life gets challenging* (2.7).

Additional survey items revealed that these respondents were excited about participating in DC Freedom Schools summer program and believed that it helped prepare them for school in the fall.

These survey results are consistent with staff impressions regarding how their scholars had changed during the course of the summer program. SLIs most frequently commented on how their scholars had become more comfortable over the 6-week period: more engaged with the virtual format, more confident reading and discussing the books, and more comfortable asking questions and taking the lead in activities.

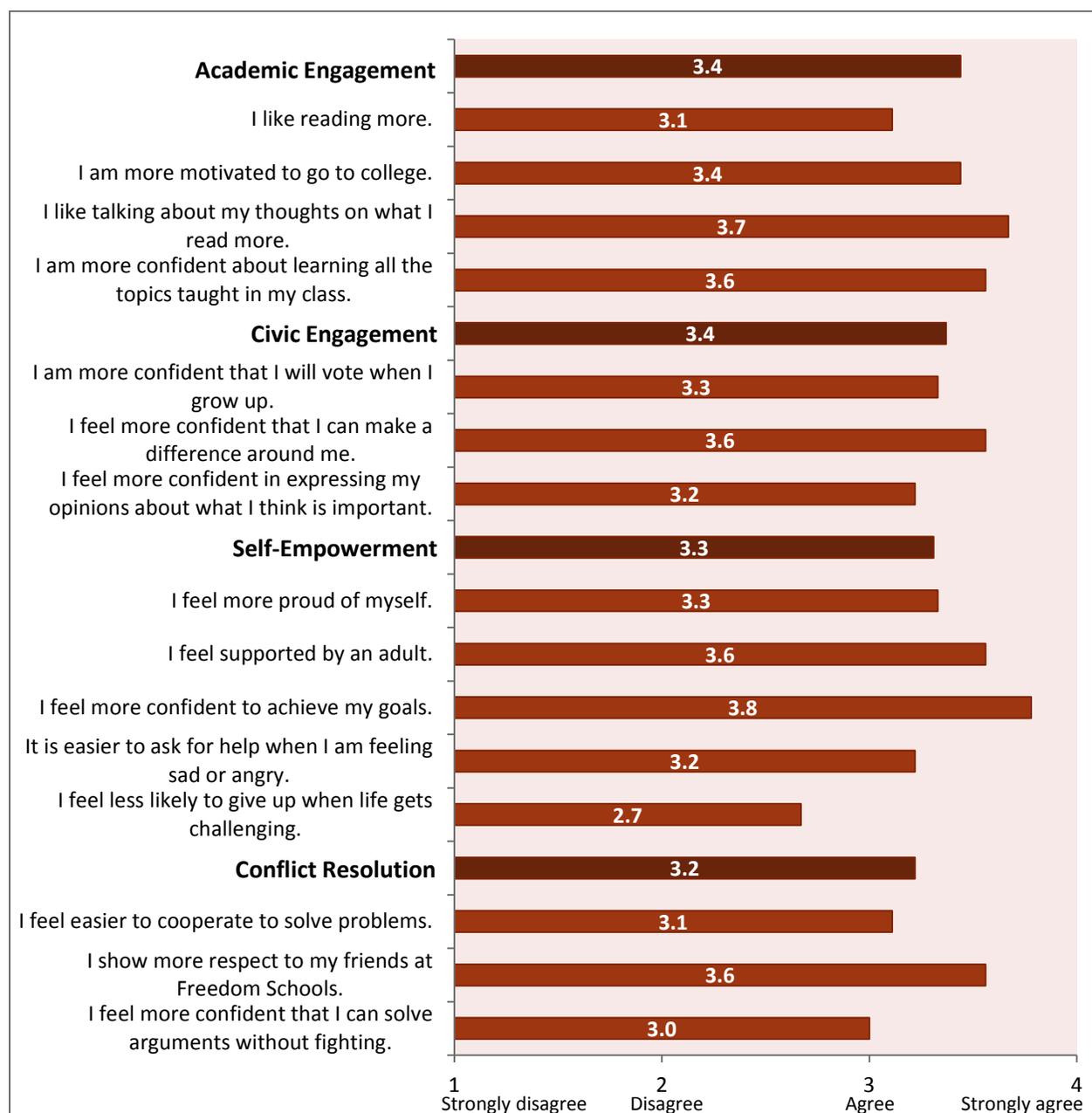
SLI: *“Students grew in their knowledge (e.g., about Civil Rights) and we kept them engaged so they weren’t idle over the summer. The program helped their comprehension skills and we could ask more in-depth questions as the summer progressed.”*

Positive Impact on Staff

One of the goals of CDF Freedom Schools is to promote the character skills of the Servant Leader Interns (SLIs), through both staff training and their experience 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, 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 experience as an SLI had changed their attitude about



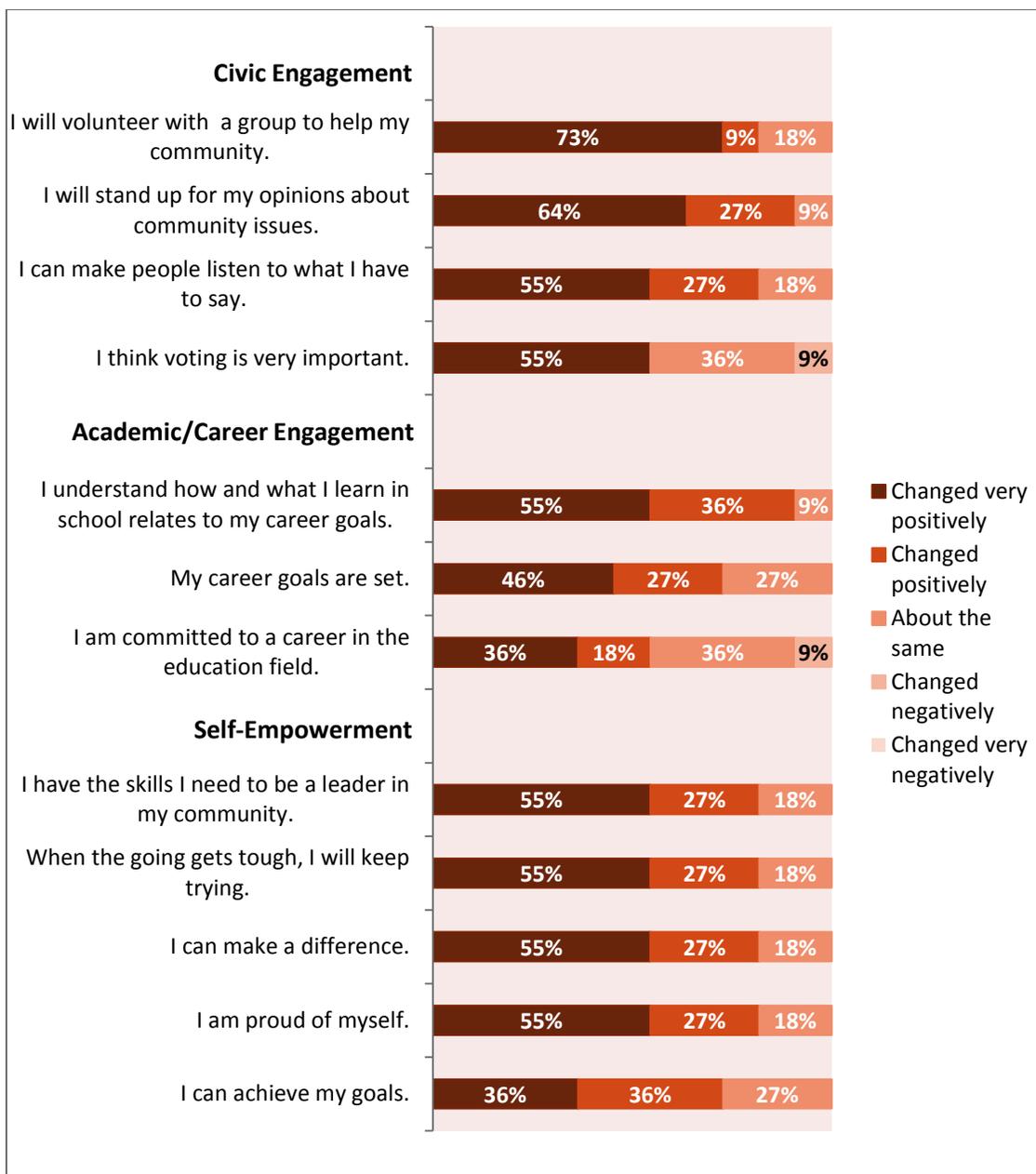
Figure 4. Post-summer program Child Attitudes: Mean Ratings on Agreement Scale (N=9 children)



statements reflecting these three character traits: self-empowerment, academic/career engagement, and civic engagement.¹¹ Eleven of the 18 SLIs and site/tech coordinators completed the survey. All respondents indicated a positive change (either “very positive” or “positive”) on each of the 12 survey items (see Figure 5).

¹¹ Survey items were designed to measure these three traits. A factor analysis conducted on similarly-worded items in a national survey of Freedom School SLIs during summer 2020 confirmed the survey’s conceptual framework.

Figure 5. Post-Program Staff Attitudes: Percent of Respondents Indicating Positive/Negative Change (N=11 staff)



Reflecting on their summer staff experience, 54 to 91% of respondents indicated that their attitude had changed in a positive direction across the 12 survey items. Two items showed the greatest impact with the highest average ratings on a five-point change scale:

- I will stand up for my opinions about community issues (4.6, 91% positive change).
- I understand how and what I learn in school relates to my career goals (4.6, 91% positive change).

Two items showing less impact on this same five-point change scale were:

- I am committed to a career in the education field (3.8, 54% positive change).
- I think voting is very important (4.1, 55% positive change).

Overall, the survey showed that the program had a positive impact on staff attitudes about civic engagement (4.4), self-empowerment (4.3), and academic/career engagement (4.2).

In interviews conducted during the last week of the program with 10 of the 18 summer staff members, these SLIs and site coordinators most frequently reported that their experience in the program had increased their confidence, specifically in their ability to work with children and other adults and to provide virtual instruction. Other personal impacts cited by these summer staff included:

- Increased motivation to become an educator and work with children;
- More interest in community work and volunteerism;
- Improved communication and leadership skills; and
- Feelings of empowerment and excitement about the upcoming school year.

Recommendations

The 2019-20 DC Freedom Schools experience with after-school and summer programs suggests recommendations for future programming, especially as the DC Public Schools continue with a virtual learning model into the 2020-21 school year. These recommendations fall in the areas of staff training, parent engagement, distance enrichment, coordination with DCPS, and access to program materials.

- **Staff training.** One of the characteristics of effective expanded learning time programs is high quality staffing (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The DC Freedom Schools after-school and 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. Still feedback gathered from the current program staff on 2019-20 implementation challenges suggest that staff would benefit from additional training, particularly in classroom management, best practices in reading instruction, and the cultural foundations of the Freedom Schools approach.
- **Parent engagement.** Another characteristic of quality expanded learning time programs is strong family involvement. DC Freedom Schools has recognized the importance of parent engagement and each year has planned events and activities to get parents involved in the program (e.g., book club, family field trips). 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, DC Freedom Schools has at times struggled to get parents effectively engaged in their child's after-school and summer programs. Such parent involvement is especially important in supporting an online program. Program staff members agree on the need to address this challenge and are planning more frequent parent meetings in Fall 2020.
- **Coordination with DCPS.** A third characteristic of effective after-school programs is linkages between school-day and after-school personnel. DC Freedom Schools' after-school program includes components that should support the DCPS instructional program, in particular homework assistance, tutoring, and the Integrated Reading Curriculum. DCPS teachers typically leave shortly after dismissal and otherwise do not have time to communicate with after-school staff about the academic or social-emotional learning needs of individual students. This lack of

collaboration is exacerbated by the current virtual programs, now in place for the foreseeable future in DCPS and in community-based after school programs. In addition, DC Freedom Schools has not been able to access DCPS student data for participants in order to for example, check instructional reading levels or evaluate the program's impact on academic achievement or reading performance. Coordination with DCPS regarding student data should improve in the 2020-21 school year as DC Freedom Schools will submit a research application to DCPS to access participant data. And DC Freedom Schools focus on homework assistance in Fall 2020 will necessitate better communication with DCPS teachers about their virtual instruction.

- **Distance enrichment.** With DCPS and DC community-based programs continuing to provide virtual programs, DC Freedom Schools should further research best practices in distance learning. An after-school program faces the extra challenge of trying to engage students who have already experienced multiple hours of screen time as part of their DCPS instructional day. They will need to maximize those aspects of after-school programming that children will be craving most after so much screen time: activities that build strong relationships with their Servant Leader Interns and their scholar peers and activities that get them moving.
- **Access to program materials.** One of the strengths of the DC Freedom Schools program is the Integrated Reading Curriculum and the culturally relevant books it employs. Another favorite among DC Freedom School participants are the hands-on activities that require craft supplies. One of the casualties of virtual programs is the ready ability to distribute materials to the participants. While the Freedom Parades and Friday Freedom Zones served as creative mechanisms for distributing program materials, DC Freedom Schools will need to find more reliable solutions to this distribution challenge.



APPENDIX A: References

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APPENDIX B: Child Survey

Figure B.1 presents the results of CDF’s Child Survey, administered to a sample of DC Freedom School scholars at Boone Elementary during the 2019-20 school year. While the program was not able to follow through on its intention of administering both a pre- and post-Child Survey to after-school participants, these partial data do suggest that DC Freedom School participants are showing relatively high levels of performance on these survey items which measure four desired character traits: academic engagement, civic engagement, self-empowerment, and conflict resolution.

Figure B.1. Boone Child Attitudes: Mean Ratings on Agreement Scale (N=22 children)

