

Road to Freedom



The CDF Freedom Schools® program opened its doors in 1995 with two sites and 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 empower African Americans via civic engagement and education—*CDF Freedom Schools* provides a high-quality, research-based, reading enrichment program for children and youth living in underserved and impoverished communities, a majority of which are communities of color. The *CDF Freedom Schools* afterschool and summer programming improves children's reading skills and empowers them to believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves, their communities, the nation and beyond.



Since its inception the *CDF Freedom Schools* program has expanded its reach considerably: in summer 2017, the program was offered at 174 sites in 27 different states. To date *CDF Freedom Schools* summer

and afterschool programs have served over 149,000 K-12 'scholars', the majority of whom are children of color and children living in poverty: African American children make up 62 percent of those served, Latino children 15 percent and 81 percent of all scholars qualify for Free and Reduced-price Meal System services. 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 exciting *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. Students take part in activity-based lessons related to the multicultural books, books that they find especially engaging because they see themselves reflected in the characters' faces, settings and storylines. The appeal of the books boosts their motivation to read, engendering positive feelings about learning and increased self-esteem.

Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools Program

More than 150,000 children have completed a culturally competent literacy and social action enrichment program that improves reading skills by an average of 8 months over a 6-week period.

The 16,000 young adults who have worked with these children



have developed leadership skills and have been exposed to classroom teaching. Hundreds of communities in 30 states across the country have been have experienced the transformative effects of hosting *Freedom Schools* program sites, with parents, local businesses, schools, churches and volunteers working together to build the next generation of scholars and leaders.



La'Mont Geddis was already studying education at Howard University when he got involved with *Freedom Schools*, but says much of what he knows about how to care for and reach children and be a rainbow in their clouds comes from the *Freedom Schools*: “My long list of what I learned through *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, June 5, 2016

The effectiveness of the curriculum is well documented. A multi-year assessment of *CDF Freedom Schools* that was 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 saw a gain of 8 mos. in reading level on average, while those below grade level at the beginning of the summer saw an amazing average gain of 1.2 years! The largest gains of all were seen in African American boys.

Improving literacy is by no means the only purpose of *CDF Freedom Schools*. *Freedom Schools* sites are places where scholars are encouraged to study and appreciate their cultural history, and they are taught that they have the ability and the responsibility to create positive change in the world. From the motivational opening activity, *Harambee!*—which takes its name from the Swahili word meaning “pull together”—scholars 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. The college age teachers at the *Freedom Schools* sites mostly come from communities similar to the children’s, and act as mentors in whom they can see themselves as college-goers as well as models of civic engagement.

CDF Freedom Schools is an empowering, life-altering opportunity for young scholars to build a strong base of literacy skills and a belief in their worth and capacity to positively impact the world around them—all of which has led many past scholars and interns to pursue careers in such fields as education, medicine, the law and social services, and work in communities most in need of their services. 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.