DEMONSTRATING THE POWER OF FREEDOM
VIRTUAL FREEDOM SCHOOLS LITERACY ACADEMY
2020 IMPACT REPORT CARD

FREEDOM IS JOYFUL, EYE-OPENING AND UPLIFTING.

The purpose of this Impact Report Card is to share with our families, our communities and supporters the progress we made against the exceedingly high standards we set for ourselves.

To our stakeholders and allies, THANK YOU for making possible the Freedom Schools Literacy Academy—an affirmative, subversive act of hope. Thank you for standing defiantly against the legacy of oppression confronting our children and communities. Thank you for investing in a proven model for improving early literacy and the school-to-activism pipeline.

Thank you for helping to liberate education.

INVEST IN A PROVEN MODEL.

Families, get notified when FSLA reopens.
Students, explore careers in education.

TheCenterBlackEd.org
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2020 IMPACT REPORT CARD

IN TIMES OF STRUGGLE, WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF FREEDOM.

IN THE SPRING OF 2020, THERE WAS A CONVERGENCE OF CHALLENGES CONFRONTING OUR NATION. A pandemic. A racist endemic of police brutality. The collective demand that Black Lives Matter. White supremacist threats against social uprisings. Severe economic fallout unseen in the last century. All leading to chaos in our schools and disruptions in out-of-school-time programming. Families were left to figure out, on-the-fly, how to keep their children learning.

Without disposable income to hire Zoom tutors or organize well-resourced pandemic pods—without the luxury of working from home and the privilege of homeschooling their kids—families of color from underserved communities were left struggling the most.

These essential workers have been braving greater dangers and vulnerabilities brought on by their lack of access to quality healthcare and other social inequities. All the while, they have been anxious and worried about their children’s erosion of education, especially over the summer months following the abrupt closing of public schools with months still left in the school year.

Too many of their children were already lagging behind standard expectations—not because they weren’t capable of doing better, but because our schools are disproportionately underfunded and the cultural pedagogy and teacher-student parity that could help close achievement gaps doesn’t exist.

Studies show students’ higher racial-ethnic pride correlates with higher achievement as measured by grades and standardized test scores. They also show that when Black students have Black teachers, they do better in school.

When they have one Black teacher by 3rd grade, they’re 13% more likely to enroll in college. With two Black teachers in the mix early on, that stat jumps to 32%. For Black boys from low-income households, their on-time high school graduation rate soars by 40%.1
THE FREEDOM SCHOOLS LITERACY ACADEMY MODEL

THE FREEDOM SCHOOLS LITERACY ACADEMY WAS DESIGNED—LONG BEFORE THE WORLD EVER HEARD OF COVID-19 OR GEORGE FLOYD—TO DEMONSTRATE A VERY DIFFERENT KIND OF LEARNING MODEL that could address educational inequalities and our nation’s racist history that have created unconscionable achievement gaps.


At our summer academy, expert Black educators coach aspiring Black college student-teachers and work with high school apprentices interested in exploring careers in education. All to provide underserved Black and Brown elementary students the personalized literacy boost they each need while deepening their racial identity.

Our Freedom Schools Literacy Academy is based on the idea Black and Brown students learn best within a context of understanding their culture, and when they are taught by people who can serve as mirrors, and not just windows, to their world.

Freedom Schools Literacy Academy is no different from any other educational institution, including public schools. All take a cultural approach. It’s just that they’re almost always white-centered, without saying so, because it’s been standardized and normalized. Yes, even when their school community is majority non-white.

We proudly take a non-standardized Black pedagogical approach. Which is why so many of our Academy members express they’ve never experienced an educational enterprise like this and that, by summer’s end, they feel mentally stronger, psychologically healthier and emotionally nourished.

Enrollment is free and we also set-aside small home technology grants based on need, but without additional support our space remains limited.

From the start, the Freedom Schools Literacy Academy was conceived to meet the unique needs of young Black and Brown children from disenfranchised communities while at the same time strengthening the school-to-activism pipeline for the next generation of exceptional Black educators.

But unexpectedly this summer, our unconventional approach—founded on the principals of Black pedagogy with a focus on teacher-student race/ethnic parity and intergenerational learning—turned out to be an exponentially more powerful response to the unforeseen chaos of 2020.

When the pandemic broke, we never debated not doing or postponing the Freedom Schools Literacy Academy. We remained committed to bringing this rich opportunity to our families, laser-focused on how we could retool our in-person model for the virtual world without sacrificing quality, intent and cultural import.

SO, IT WAS GRATIFYING WHEN WE PUT OUT A CALL TO LOVING PARENTS OF BLACK AND BROWN CHILDREN TO HELP US COMMIT THE REVOLUTIONARY ACT OF TEACHING THEIR CHILD SUPERBLY, ALL 100 DIGITAL SEATS FILLED IN LESS THAN 12 HOURS.
TOGETHER,
WE STRIVE TO BUILD STRONG BLACK CHILDREN
BECAUSE IT IS EASIER TO BUILD STRONG CHILDREN
THAN REPAIR BROKEN ADULTS.

SUMMARY OF GOALS
AND OUR APPROACH

SCHOLARS
(rising 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders)

GOAL: To make gains in early literacy and reinforce positive racial identity.

APPROACH: Four weeks (July 13 to August 7) amounting to 35 hours of personalized instruction in phonics, reading comprehension and vocabulary-building, leveraging Black pedagogy, a culturally-responsive curriculum, and Harambee Circles, as well as calming mindfulness and movement breaks.

JUNIOR SERVANT LEADERS
(high school apprentices)

GOAL: To encourage careers in teaching.

APPROACH: Five weeks (July 6 to August 7) of participating in workshops led by Black educators, presenting independent research and working within peer groups to complete group assignments on Black history and pedagogy.

SERVANT LEADERS
(college student interns)

GOAL: To build teaching skills and professional confidence.

APPROACH: Five weeks (July 6 to August 7) through training in Black pedagogy, instructor experiences, expert coaching and peer support.
Mr. El-Mekki is also the Founder of The Fellowship: Black Male Educators for Social Justice. He is a respected national educator-activist, popular blogger and podcaster, and former Philadelphia teacher, principal and ambassador fellow for the U.S. Department of Education.

A longtime educator, teaching a wide range of subjects (from music to computer skills) and ages (preschool through adults), Ms. Harrison also has several years of non-profit professional experience.

Dr. Seaton is a former Teach for America teacher, Purdue University counselor, sought-after national urban-education consultant, and founding principal of Mastery Charter School-Pickett Campus.

Ms. Terrell has 15+ years of experience in education, including 10 years with Freedom Schools, working with at-risk youth, and building outcomes-driven school culture.

The Freedom Schools Literacy Academy integrates the highly respected Freedom Schools model developed by the Children's Defense Fund and Philadelphia Freedom Schools with the best practices and latest research in culturally-responsive early literacy instruction, curriculum and professional development.

Research and implementation support was provided by Julia Lindsey, under the supervision of national literacy expert, University of Michigan Professor Nell K. Duke, Ed.D., and Dr. Miriam Ortiz.

Ms. Lindsey, a former elementary school teacher, is a doctoral candidate in education, specializing in literacy, language and culture, at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on practical, culturally-responsive curricula and materials to improve the teaching of foundational skills and early reading in urban elementary schools.

Dr. Ortiz, a former K-12 teacher, is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Southern Methodist University, where her work focuses on early literacy and special education. She is also the executive director for the Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children.
Mr. Burrell is a native Philadelphian and teacher, whose history students achieved the highest benchmark data in the Mastery network. He helped lead Uncommon Schools and manage Teacher Leadership and Development at Teach For America.

Ms. Hines is also a native Philadelphian and a current teacher at Mastery Charter-Shoemaker campus. She produces a web series for Re/Member Black Philadelphia, which leverages digital media and technology to document and celebrate the rich experiences, institutions, spaces and cultures of Black people across the city.

Another native Philadelphian, Ms. Sulayman was a founding member of Mastery Charter Shoemaker Campus. With over 16 years of education experience, she has been instrumental in school turnarounds and closing student achievement gaps in West Philadelphia public schools. She was recognized with the MACCS Award for Excellence in Teaching.

“Through a pandemic and virtually, to still be able to get that energy, and feel that community...it was awesome for us.”

—Rikeyah Lindsay
Mother of FSLA Scholar
A CELEBRATION OF BLACK IDENTITY

Freedom Schools Literacy Academy Scholars reported increased positive views of themselves, their communities and race/ethnicity (n=87, Pre/Post Racial Attitudes Survey).

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This past summer, we started every day with Harambee, a joyful coming together of the entire community. At each Harambee, we asked members to recognize others for an achievement or contribution they made, or to say something, just to let someone else know you see them.

We don’t celebrate our Blackness and practice Black pedagogy to just feel good about ourselves and our communities. We infuse our Freedom Schools Literacy Academy programming with cultural positivity to counter the devastating impact of racist pedagogy and classist schooling on Black students, and fuel the learning and academic success of our young scholars.

Studies have shown higher racial-ethnic pride is related to higher achievement measured by grades and standardized test scores. Studies also show that Black students who have Black teachers do better in school.

When they have one Black teacher by 3rd grade, they’re 13 percent more likely to enroll in college. With two Black teachers in the mix early on, that stat jumps to 32 percent. For Black boys from low-income households, their on-time high school graduation rate soars by 40 percent.

“I HAVE NICE TEACHERS AND THEY LOOK LIKE ME.”
—AALIYAH WILLIAMS
FSLA SCHOLAR

“THIS IS THE FIRST TIME MY SON EXPERIENCED A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT... THAT FURTHER DEVELOPED HIS LOVE OF HIS BLACKNESS.”
—JAMINA CLAY
MOTHER OF FSLA SCHOLAR
LEAPS IN EARLY LITERACY

Freedom Schools Literacy Academy Scholars:

- Made significant gains in targeted vocabulary, such as “diversity,” “unique,” “courage,” “obstacle” and “determination” (n=87, FSLA Read Aloud Pre/Post Assessments).
- Made significant gains in reading comprehension, detailing characters, settings, problems and solutions in their retelling of stories (n=87, FSLA Read Aloud Pre/Post Assessments).

Scholars working on beginning reading skills:

- Jumped 3.23 word-reading levels, on average, a 70% improvement in word reading (n=52, Friends on the Block Pre/Post Assessments).

Scholars working on more advanced reading skills:

- Read 20.55 more words per minute on average, which is more than 240% better than the average rate gain for 1st and 2nd graders over a four-week period (n=23, ORF Pre/Post Assessments).

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

A recent study of elementary school students reported a summer slide in learning, on average, a 20 percent loss of school-year gains in reading. With great expectations, our scholars defied the odds, shoring up their academic confidence and making leaps in early literacy. All of which will better position them for the tumultuous school year ahead.

"I CAN READ BETTER."

—JOSH TURNER
FSLA SCHOLAR

"I THINK THE BIGGEST THING IS [MY DAUGHTER] WAS BEING CHALLENGED."

—NAFIS RICKS
FATHER OF FSLA SCHOLAR
“WE’RE HAVING SO MUCH FUN READING AND LEARNING NEW THINGS.”

—UMAR MUHAMMAD
FSLA SCHOLAR
WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Black students do better when they have Black teachers. When they have one Black teacher by 3rd grade, they’re 13 percent more likely to enroll in college. With two Black teachers early on, that stat jumps to 32 percent. For Black boys from low-income households, their on-time high school graduation rate soars by 40 percent.

Yet, nationwide, only seven percent of all public school educators nationwide are Black, while the percentage of students of color continue to increase in Philadelphia and across the country, perpetuating gross student achievement gaps.

James Baldwin said that to teach Black children is a revolutionary act. At the Freedom Schools Literacy Academy, we like to change up this quote to say: to teach Black children superbly is the revolutionary act.

For us, that means framing our teaching with a solid understanding of Black history and Black pedagogy. To viscerally feel both the unlimited potential and unjust challenges Black students confront, and then be accountable for their quality learning.

“[MY SCHOLARS] HAVE IMPACTED ME IN WAYS THAT HAVE SHIFTED MY THOUGHTS, MINDSETS, OPINIONS ABOUT SO MANY DIFFERENT THINGS.”

—SERVANT LEADER
“WHAT SERVANT LEADERS SAY”

EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

What I received was more than what I could have imagined. It really did exceed my expectations. The first day of training wiped away my fears.

YOU CAN TELL YOU ALL PUT A TON OF WORK INTO THIS. Everything was organized and intentional.

In the beginning I didn't believe in myself or my abilities but throughout the program this shifted. I like the new curriculum and having more leeway with the lesson plan. There was a lot of room for personalizing.

I LOVED HAVING THE COHORT SET UP TO SHARE EXPERIENCES AND RESOURCES. I liked the professional development workshops. All the extra things beyond just teaching really made a difference. It felt more like a full experience.

I WAS WAKING UP EVERY MORNING EXCITED TO TEACH AND LEARN WITH MY STUDENTS. This year reinforced my love of teaching. I miss it already.

AREAS OF PERSONAL GROWTH

HOLDING MYSELF ACCOUNTABLE FOR MY SCHOLARS’ LEARNING CONFIDENCE AND BEING ASSERTIVE IN TEACHING.

Becoming more CREATIVE, PATIENT and FLEXIBLE.

Understanding, connecting and engaging my scholars. Learning how to reach and talk with them, instigating their participation.

Checking-in with scholars to see what’s working and what’s not. Pacing my teaching to ADAPT TO EACH SCHOLAR.

Specific instructional techniques, like scaffolding and picture-it questions.

Getting more organized in lesson planning. TIME MANAGEMENT.

“I WAS REALLY LEARNING MORE ABOUT MYSELF AS A BLACK MAN, MY ROLE IN SOCIETY...I WAS ABLE TO REALLY RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ABLE TO CONVEY THE PASSION I HAVE FOR LEARNING, AND ALSO HAVE THE INTELLECT TO BACK THAT UP, AND THEN GIVE IT OUT INTO THE WORLD.”

—HORACE RYANS III
JUNIOR SERVANT LEADER
100% PERCENTAGE OF SERVANT LEADERS who reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their Literacy Coach.

POSITIVE REVIEWS OF COACHES (6.0 SCALE) HOW SERVANT LEADERS CONSISTENTLY RATED THEIR COACHES on receiving guidance for improving their teaching (5.79), providing quality support (5.69), feeling respected and valued (5.69), affirming their students’ racial identity (5.64) as well as their own (5.47), and following up to see how they were doing (5.58).

“WHAT LITERACY COACHES SAY”

EXPECTED TO BE CHALLENGED.
Expected to celebrate Black culture and identity. Got all that.

Camaraderie exceeded my expectations.
WE WERE LIKE FAMILY. Compared to other places where we’re told what to do and how to do it, here, we had to figure out problems together. Our voices were heard.

WE SUPPORTED EACH OTHER SO WE COULD PIVOT QUICKLY when our students were reading at a higher level than expected to continually meet their needs.

WE SAW GROWTH IN THE SERVANT LEADERS. Even if some of them don’t end up teaching, they’ve all gained skills they can use in any field they choose.

Virtual experience exceeded my expectations. Nothing was watered down. WE ARE ABOUT CREATING COMMUNITY, AND WE STILL DID THAT ONLINE.

YEAR-TO-YEAR CHANGES

It was far more organized. More training and more coaching for the teachers. There was also a clear hierarchy. People knew who to go to and how to get support.

UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO BLACK PEDAGOGY WAS THE SAME. ACADEMIC RIGOR AND EXCELLENCE WAS THE SAME. WE MADE SURE THERE WAS A SPACE FOR KIDS TO BE LOVED ON.

What changed was the execution. The operational excellence was different. After meeting with researchers, we were able to implement ways to improve in real time instead of waiting to the end.
“SO WE WORK TOGETHER...WE INVEST IN EACH OTHER. EVERYBODY...APPROACH[ES] THE WORK FROM A LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT EVERYBODY HAS SOMETHING VALUABLE TO CONTRIBUTE. IT’S BEEN A FORMATIVE INSTITUTION IN MY LIFE.”

—ANSHARAYE HINES
JUNIOR SERVANT LEADER COACH AND PROGRAM COORDINATOR
SCHOLARS] SHOWED ME THAT TEACHING IS REALLY NOT THAT BAD. I HAD NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT TEACHING BEFORE...HAVING A TEACHER THAT LOOKS LIKE YOU IS IMPORTANT. THEY CAN RELATE.

—SERVANT LEADER
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