

## “Something Inside So Strong”: How the Historic Freedom School Program Can Sustain Liberatory Praxis in Today’s Schools

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### Abstract

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The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools program has experienced success in moving the needle in a critical area of student academic achievement such as reducing summer learning loss. Although there has been extensive research documenting this success, there has been limited research in the field of education policy concerning the program’s policy implications and recommendations for practices in education. Further, given the success CDF Freedom Schools have experienced in reducing summer learning loss, as evidenced by existing research in the field, there is no clear policy concerning implementing the Freedom School concept as a state-level education policy to improve student academic achievement. We contend that a stronger, and more conceptually clear policy that has as its foundation, principles of the historic intentions of CDF Freedom Schools is a necessity at state levels so that the program can be successfully expanded to public schools across America.

**Keywords:** Achievement, learning, policy, state, literacy

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### Introduction

Extensive research has documented the historic significance and educational success of the Freedom Schools—a historic education program grounded in the principles of equitable education and the Civil Rights Movement. A myriad of organizations continue to implement the model with fidelity, most notably the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools program. Still, there is a paucity of research around its policy implications and recommendations for national liberatory education practice today. The Freedom Schools have inspired statewide policies in the state of Illinois, year-round, out-of-school programming in Washington, D.C., and a “Freedom University” initiative for students without documentation, among other examples across the country. Some of these include Children’s Defense Fund-California and Freedom Schools Partners in Charlotte, N.C. which are contemporary models inspired by and rooted in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project with a focus upon literacy attainment. Arizona state legislators have also funded “Freedom Schools” at colleges and universities. Given that programs use across the country, and in the case of Arizona, the name is used to fund problematic initiatives that harbor values antithetical to the historic Freedom School model, there is no clear policy about implementing the Freedom School concept through educational policy at the state level despite existing research that shows the model has a proven track record of success in reducing summer learning loss. After reviewing the literature that documents the success of the Freedom Schools, we suggest that a stronger, and more conceptually clear policy grounded in the principles of the historic intention of Freedom Schools is needed at the state level to expand the program to public schools across the nation.

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## Freedom School Overview

“Freedom Schools” and conceptions of education for freedom have existed since the origins of public education in the South after the Civil War in 1865. Activists and public education advocates founded Freedom Schools during the Civil Rights Movement, most notably in the state of Mississippi in 1964, but also in Boston, Chicago, New York, and other sites outside the South during the 1960s (Clemons, 2014; Franklin, 2012; Hale, 2016; Payne, 1996; Perstein, 1990; Sturkey, 2010). Marian Wright Edelman, a civil rights activist and the first Black woman to pass the Mississippi bar, founded the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) in 1973. Through her organization, Edelman launched a national Freedom School network in 1990 based on this historic model that continues today across 180 sites nationwide. Since the founding of the CDF Freedom School initiative, over 150,000 students have been educated in the program and over 17,000 young people have been trained in the pedagogical model (Childrens Defense Fund, 2020a). Additionally, scholars have closely examined the Freedom Schools and determined the model to be effective in literacy attainment, self-empowerment, motivation, and efficacy. The program is also successful in creating a culturally sustaining and critically engaging curriculum.

Though extant research has documented the success of the Freedom Schools and a variety of programs continue to implement the model with fidelity, there is a paucity of research around the policy implications at state levels. The Freedom Schools have inspired statewide policies in Illinois, a year-round out-of-school programming effort in Washington D.C., and a “Freedom University” initiative for students without documentation, among other instances across the country. Arizona legislators have also funded “freedom schools” at colleges and universities. Given that programs use across the country, and, in the case of Arizona, the name is used to fund problematic initiatives that harbor values antithetical to the historic Freedom Schools, there is no clear policy about implementing the concept through educational policy at state levels.

The Freedom Schools today continue the historic traditions of inclusive, multicultural curriculum that influenced the growth of the schools during the Civil Rights Movement (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001; Clemons, Price, & Clemons, 2016; Hale 2011; Sturkey & Hale, 2015;). The summer Freedom School model is built around essential principles grounded in high quality academic enrichment, social action and civic engagement, intergenerational servant leadership development; nutrition and mental health; and parent and family involvement (Childrens Defense Fund, 2020b; Howard, 2016). One of the most distinguishing aspects is its culturally relevant curriculum and inclusive, justice-centered pedagogy. This curriculum integrates age-appropriate texts from Black authors and scholars of color that provide positive and self-affirming identity development that centers joy and growth. Additionally, many of the texts are geared toward liberatory or participatory social action that coincides with a “Social Action Day,” which is coordinated on the same day every summer with each CDF Freedom School across the country (Jackson, 2020; Jackson & Boutte 2009; Jackson & Howard, 2014; Piper, 2019).

## Freedom School Research

Research has unequivocally demonstrated that Freedom Schools are an effective model and policy approach for literacy attainment. Some studies have found substantial and historic success in the Freedom School model. Extensive research using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methodologies have examined the Freedom Schools from various perspectives: historical, sociological, educational, and evaluative. This research has generally found that Freedom Schools effectively address the challenge in K-12 education of students experiencing summer learning loss. Moreover, Freedom School research has provided new analysis that moves away from the deficit-based language of the achievement gap to pragmatically addressing and eradicating our national and collective “education debt,” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007).

First and foremost, much of the research has demonstrated the historical importance of Freedom Schools and the potential they hold today. The Freedom Schools have been influential throughout the history of education in the United States as well as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Freedom struggle (Clemons, 2014; Franklin, 2021; Hale, 2016; Payne, 1996; Perlstein, 1990; Sturkey, 2010). Scholars have built upon the historical significance of the Freedom Schools and demonstrated their contemporary significance through engaging in critical and structural discourse, reimagining alternatives to restrictive or oppressive realities experienced today, articulation of rights and freedom in a contemporary context, generating cultural wealth, and sites of care and compassion, all of which ultimately posit the Freedom School as both an analytical and pedagogical counternarrative to dominant and white narratives and pedagogies (Davis et al., 2021; Dunkerly, 2013; Franklin, 2014; Green, 2014; Howard, 2016; Jackson 2020; Jackson & Howard, 2014; Watson, 2014).

Researchers have also evaluated the Freedom Schools through multiple localized studies in Kansas City, Missouri, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Bennettsville, South Carolina (Hill, 2018; Philliber Research Associates, 2008; Portwood, Parara-Rogers, & Taylor, 2009; Taylor, Medina, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2010), in a statewide study in Florida (Mesa, et al, 2021) as well as numerous studies that have drawn from national samples and data (Deschenes & Malone, 2011; Childrens Defense Fund, 2021; Lara-Cinisomo, Taylor, & Medina 2019; Lara-Cinisomo, Taylor, & Medina 2020; Scott, Renbarger, & Laird, 2020). Key findings from national studies have established criteria that document the success of the Freedom School program and have found that 60% to 65% of Freedom School scholars show gains in reading, 71.4% show improvement in reading challenging texts, and scholars have demonstrated a two-month gain in reading ability over the course of the Freedom School program, among other key findings (Deschenes & Malone, 2011; Lara-Cinisomo, Taylor & Medina, 2019, 2020; Scott, Renbarger, Laird, 2020).

CDF Freedom Schools have a proven track record for addressing summer learning loss and lagging gains in reading which lends credence to them being a viable policy model for states to address the achievement gap or education deficits in K-12 education. Mesa, Roehrig, Fanari, Durtschi, Ha, Rawls, and Davis (Davis et al., 2021) offer compelling evidence through a study showing that participation in CDF Freedom Schools, a free six-week literacy-focused, culturally relevant summer camp may prevent summer learning loss. These researchers used a sample of 125 students who participated in three sites of a summer camp and completed pre-test and post-test assessments. The evidence from their study suggests that a literacy-focused summer educational experience can provide students with an academically enriching opportunity to help curtail summer learning loss and improve literacy attainment. The results of this study showed that this was particularly the case for students in grades 3 and 5 who experienced small gains on average in vocabulary.

A 2016 review of seven evaluation studies of Freedom School Partner's, Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools' program in Charlotte, NC yielded results that lend credence to CDF Freedom Schools becoming a viable policy option at the state level to address the achievement gap or education deficits in K-12 education. For example, these results showed that approximately 60% to 65% of scholar participants showed gains in reading, 25% to 35% maintaining their ability to read, and only 5% to 10% declining in their ability to read as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) at the Frustration level, which is a ceiling level in a child's ability to read (Taylor, Medina, Lara-Cinisomo, 2011). These results clearly show that CDF Freedom School programs have the capacity to move the needle in terms of effectively addressing existing achievement gaps or education deficits. Further, a related study by the Center of Adolescent Literacies at UNC-Charlotte evaluating the impact of CDF Freedom School programming on the reading ability of students served in Bennettsville, South Carolina during the summer of 2010 also offers results that support the view that CDF Freedom Schools can be a viable policy option for states seeking effective approaches to address achievement gaps or education deficits in K-12 education. This study aimed to assess approximately 25% of Freedom School scholars at the Marlboro County Freedom School site in Bennettsville, SC. During summer 2010, there were approximately 223 scholars enrolled in the CDF Freedom School program located at Marlboro County High School. Amongst these scholars, 66 children or just over 29.6% were assessed at least once. The sample was stratified by level, gender, ethnicity, grade, and age. The results reported by this study are based on 42 children who were part of the researchers' study where they had complete pre-test and post-test data. The 42 scholars on whom the researchers for this study report fell short of their goal of 25% but provided a reasonable sample size of nearly 19% of the Marlboro County High School. The study results indicated that most students showed growth in reading with 50% showing growth in independent reading, and 71.4% showing improvement in reading challenging texts (Taylor, Medina, Lara-Cinisomo, 2010). Further, only 9.5% based on the results of the study showed a decline in Basic Reading Inventory or BRI (Taylor, Medina, Lara-Cinisomo, 2011). Another related study was conducted exposing 414 scholar participants in grades K-8 to the BRI which found improvement for them in the Independent and Frustration levels.

Mesa, Roehrig, Fanari, Durtschi, Ha, Rawls, and Davis (Mesa et al., 2021) offer compelling evidence through a study showing that participation in CDF Freedom Schools, a free six-week literacy-focused, culturally relevant summer camp can prevent summer reading loss. These researchers used a sample of 125 students who participated in three sites of a summer camp and completed pre-test and post-test reading assessments. The evidence from their study suggests that a literacy-focused summer educational experience can provide students with an academically enriching opportunity to help curtail summer reading loss. Further, the results of their study showed that this was particularly the case for students in grades 3 and 5 who experienced small gains in vocabulary. The research on the Freedom Schools demonstrates an effective literacy program for youth who have been historically disenfranchised that helps to close the achievement gap, stymies summer learning loss, and, when situated in a historic context, helps address the educational debt the system has acquired over time.

Researchers have also examined the program's impact on the effective social and emotional development of students. In addition to reading and literacy apprehension, researchers have found that the Freedom School model has demonstrated the capacity for building self-efficacy, motivation to read, and positive identity development (Ares, Smith & Wu, 2019; Piper, 2019; Watson, 2014). Additionally, the Freedom Schools have developed an affirming, positive, and culturally sustaining curriculum, and pedagogy (Clemons, 2014; Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001; Hale, 2011; Jackson, 2020; Jackson & Boutte, 2009; Piper, 2019; Sturkey & Hale, 2015).

These findings showed that those children with a history of grade repetition saw more improvement than others while scholar participants in higher levels demonstrated more improvement than those at lower levels (Lara-Cinismo, Taylor, & Medina, 2019). Most significantly, these study results prove that CDF Freedom Schools can effectively address achievement gaps or education deficits which are major challenges facing our nation's K-12 public education system.

### **Freedom Schools Today**

An assessment of the landscape as it concerns the existence of Freedom Schools in the U.S. reveals that there are contemporary models which are inspired by and rooted in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. An example of one of these models is The Children's Defense Fund-California Freedom School Program, a six-week intensive summer literacy and cultural enrichment program serving children in grades K-12. Through partnerships with local schools, faith and community-based organizations, municipalities, colleges and universities, and juvenile detention centers, valuable programs are offered to improve literacy. These students in the program are taught by college students at no cost to students or their families. Further, the community partners providing support for the program pay a \$285 curriculum licensing fee per student.

Another contemporary model is Freedom School Partners, a six-week literacy-based summer program in Charlotte, NC based on the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) model. This program is also taught by college students who engage in teaching and provide mentorship for the enrollees. The program has five main focuses: (1) high-quality academic and character-building enrichment; (2) parent and family involvement; (3) civic engagement and social action; (4) intergenerational servant leadership development; and (5) nutrition, health, and mental health.

There are contemporary models or examples of Freedom Schools that are the antithesis of the models rooted in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. For example, Arizona's state legislature has established at its major universities programs also known as Freedom Schools that teach students conservative values. These educational programs at the University of Arizona and Arizona State University focus upon educating students about free-market philosophies backed by conservative organizations such as the Charles Koch Foundation.

The Children's Defense Fund, a national non-profit organization, is the primary organizer of the Freedom School model today. After the rise of the Freedom Schools during the liberation struggles of the 1960s as sites of educational activism, Marian Wright Edelman reorganized the program in the early 1990s. By the summer of 1995, over 200 student leader interns in the Freedom Schools taught more 2,400 children who enrolled in 32 Freedom Schools in 13 cities across America (Edelman, 1994; Edelman, 1995). Since then, the program has grown to 180 sites nationwide and has educated over 150,000 students, with over 17,000 young people having been trained as teachers in the Freedom School pedagogical model (Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

Freedom Schools today are generally run on philanthropic or private donations in coordination but in some instances, schools are run with financial or in-kind public support at the local level. Federal funding for Freedom Schools does not exist. One example is the program in Charlotte, North Carolina, in which Charlotte Freedom School Partners runs seventeen Freedom Schools across the city (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). Another program is a partnership with five schools in the DC Public School System in Washington, D.C. to run afterschool and summer programs (Children's Defense Fund, 2022). Though CDF is the primary governing board of the Freedom School model today, it has inspired other programs that run independently of it. For instance, the Chicago Freedom School (Chicago Freedom Schools, 2021), runs independently of CDF and hosts training and community-based justice initiatives.

An assessment of how states use Freedom Schools as a policy approach and support them shows that the state of Arizona has established and funds what they refer to as "Freedom Schools" at Arizona State University and the University of Arizona as a policy approach focused upon educating students about free-market philosophies backed by conservative organizations like the Charles Koch Foundation (Center for Philosophy of Freedom;

Leingang, 2018; Small, 2018). While these schools in the state of Arizona are not based upon the CDF model and espouse values anathema to the historic Freedom School model, research reveals that there are differences nationally in terms of how Freedom Schools are conceptualized or defined.

### **Freedom School Bills in the State Legislature**

Since 2021, landmark Freedom School legislation has been introduced in Illinois and California that suggest what statewide networks could look like. For example, the proposal in California was introduced to create a pathway grant program that provided funds to schools to hire providers with proven experience and a track record in delivering effective summer school programs. These programs place a strong emphasis on exploring the diverse cultures and literatures relevant to Black students and students of color. Moreover, this proposal explored shared funding options for universal full day summer school programs in California starting with the lowest performing test scores in the state. In addition, the proposal could also be paired with a program for college students who are preparing to become certified California teachers.

Through the proposed bill in California, a Freedom School Summer Demonstration Project would be established as a pilot project to expand reading and learning loss programs to public school students. This will be accomplished by providing local educational agencies with assistance in coordinating summer school programs that aim to celebrate the cultural richness of our students in public schools, increase the reading abilities of participants, and prevent learning-loss during school recess.

The bill in California also establishes technical assistance teams for the purpose of launching pilot projects. The technical assistance teams are intended to provide hands-on intensive support for a two-year period to the local educational agencies selected to be pilot participants to create capacity for those agencies to offer full day summer school reading programs. In selecting the technical assistance teams, consideration shall be given to demonstrated expertise, including, but not limited to the following: (1.) The operation of existing school programs, but specifically summer reading and learning-loss programs; (2.) Working in low-income communities and local education agencies; and (3.) Experience working with the department, local education agencies, educational non-profits, and other education providers.

More recently during the pandemic, the Freedom Schools have gained support in Illinois from the Black caucus and passed a grant program that will fund forty-five Freedom Schools across the state through a \$17 million appropriation through COVID relief funding (Illinois General Assembly, 2021). The purpose of this funding opportunity is to establish a network of Freedom Schools that supplement public school instruction by offering programs with a mission to improve the odds for children in poverty. It is dictated in the bill that Freedom School programs funded by the grant use a research-based and multicultural curriculum for disenfranchised communities most affected by the opportunity gap and learning loss caused by the pandemic, and by expanding the teaching of African American history, developing leadership skills, and providing an understanding of the tenets of the civil rights movement. To achieve this end, the program in Illinois also calls for programs to provide for engaging, culturally relevant, and challenging curricula; high-quality teaching; wrap-around supports and opportunities; positive discipline practices, such as restorative justice; and leadership opportunities (Illinois State Board of Education Freedom School RFP, 2022).

Community and parent engagement is also integral to the Illinois legislation. Grant requirements also stipulate that programs should be built upon authentic parent and community engagement, which include a shared responsibility that values equal partnerships between families and professionals. Moreover, the bill seeks to ensure that students and families who are directly impacted by Freedom School policies and practices are the decision-makers in the creation, design, implementation, and assessment of those policies (Illinois State Board of Education Freedom School RFP, 2022).

### **Why Freedom Schools are a Viable State Policy**

Freedom Schools effectively close academic disparities and warrant greater public investment at state levels by providing funding for summer and afterschool programs, as opposed to standalone, yearlong charter schools. Given its historic significance and long tradition, Freedom Schools are a more stable investment than enabling contemporary school choice privatization mechanisms to weaken the larger system of public education (Hale, 2021; Rooks, 2017). Freedom School program development is a sound policy approach for states to address an educational debt accrued across the nation and what policymakers for two decades have defined as an existing “achievement gap” in literacy. Based upon empirical evidence from various studies, the issues of summer learning loss and lagging gains in reading

experienced by African American students continue to pose a challenge to school districts in their attempts to eradicate the achievement gap.

One of the largest impediments to a comprehensive Freedom School policy is lack of public financial support. Statewide financial support for Freedom School programs is needed and the legislative funding and guidelines as proposed in California and Illinois are suggestive of funding models that can be pursued. The fact that schools are mostly dependent upon philanthropic or private donations precludes greater access for children who need it. Additionally, as the schools are largely supported through private means, steps should be taken to address the pitfalls associated with private funding including a lack of transparency and ineffective means to reaching a wide community of families or the larger public good. The legislative agendas in California and Illinois begin with programs that are established in the community and have a demonstrated commitment to serving the local needs of historically disenfranchised communities.

When planning for a summer of afterschool program, organizers and educators should develop their Freedom School in coordination with the Children's Defense Fund (CDF). CDF has extensive experience and historic connections to the Freedom Schools of the 1960s. The organization provides integral support that school districts and boards of education do not have. In addition to a historic connection to the Freedom Schools and a firm grounding in the Civil Rights Movement, partnering with CDF offers access to professional development and teacher training, national support and training for staff, data collection and evaluation, and a full, culturally relevant curriculum with corresponding scripted lesson plans in an Integrate Reading Curriculum that is aligned with these texts.

This policy brief then has two goals. It provides support for the development and implementation of Freedom Schools as a viable policy for states to address education deficits or achievement gaps in K-12 education, and it suggests processes and frameworks for the successful development and implementation of this policy. In doing so, we offer recommendations for state policy and for implementation at the local level.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend a greater public investment in Freedom Schools at state levels by providing funding for summer and afterschool programs rather than standalone, year-long charter schools. Further, Freedom Schools should be embraced as a viable policy model at state levels given the stability of this investment compared to enabling contemporary school choice privatization mechanisms to weaken the larger system of public education. Moreover, states should utilize Freedom School program development as a sound policy approach to address educational debt and an existing achievement gap in literacy through reducing summer learning loss and reversing lagging gains in reading.

Given their proven track record for success, there should be greater statewide financial support for Freedom School programs using legislative funding and guidelines in the states of California and Illinois as models. Freedom Schools should reduce their dependency upon philanthropic or private foundations which precludes greater access for children who greatly need them. In addition, Freedom Schools should undertake measures to address pitfalls or shortcomings associated with private funding which include a lack of transparency and ineffective means of reaching a wider community of families. We contend that organizers and educators pursue Freedom School programs that are established in the community, and have a demonstrated commitment to serving the local needs of historically disenfranchised communities. Finally, we recommend that these organizers and educators develop their Freedom Schools in coordination with the Children's Defense Fund given its extensive experience, historic connections to the Freedom Schools of the 1960s, and its capacity to offer professional development, teacher and staff training, data collection and evaluation, and a culturally relevant curriculum with scripted lesson plans in an Integrated Reading Curriculum aligned with texts.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, Freedom Schools are a community organizing and liberatory civic engagement tool that can be used to empower parents, teachers, and students in demanding and implementing quality education. Teachers are trained in culturally sustaining pedagogies aimed at both individual and collective empowerment. Through weekly meetings and close interaction with the Freedom School, parents are engaged in education and share their concerns and ideas for improving education. Students, too, learn what works in a Freedom School. Freedom Schools can serve as incubators in which this knowledge is shared with traditional public schools that can then implement these provisions.

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