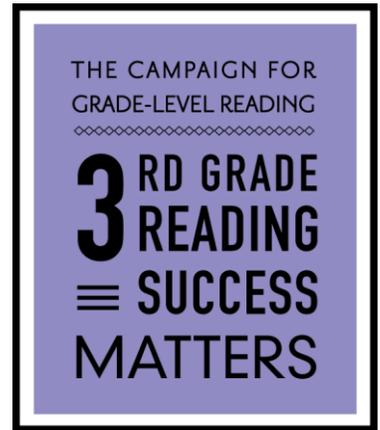


BRIGHT SPOTS

Summer Learning



Freedom School Partners, Charlotte, NC

“The children turn into excited, engaged learners, and they start believing in themselves,” says Mary Nell McPherson, executive director of Freedom School Partners (FSP) in Charlotte, North Carolina. Over and over, she sees children whose individual progress gives meaning to the positive outcomes of FSP’s literacy-based summer program. “Teachers in the Charlotte public schools tell us they know by the way students talk who’s been to Freedom School and who hasn’t.”

I can make a difference

Freedom School Partners began in 1999 as an afterschool program of the Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church to supplement its strong preschool program that prepared children from the housing project across the street to enter kindergarten. Even with that good start, many students fell behind by third grade. In 2004, in an effort to reverse those academic declines, FSP added the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® summer program for 100 “scholars” in grades K–8.

Over six weeks, the program engages children with its Integrated Reading Curriculum, which incorporates conflict resolution and social action in lessons promoting social, cultural and historical awareness. Lesson plans gradually unfold and explore the theme, *I can make a difference in myself, my family, my community, my country and my world with hope, education and action.*

Building community

“The community embraced this work as more and more people said, ‘Not on my watch are we going to lose these children,’” McPherson recounts. The number of Freedom School Partners grew as people in Charlotte saw for themselves how the innovative, fun-with-books program turned children into eager readers and excited learners. By 2011, Freedom School Partners sponsored summer programs for 986 scholars at 15 sites across the city. Now an independent nonprofit organization, FSP aspires to serve 5,000 children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg by 2016.

WHO THEY ARE

Freedom School Partners:

- Uses the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools model.
- Offers a 6-week summer literacy program, 5 days a week.
- Works with faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, community centers and schools.
- Served 986 scholars, grades K–8, at 15 sites in 2011.
- Set a goal to serve 5,000 children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg by 2016.

87% of scholars qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Meals.

\$1,200 cost per child for a 6-week program at no cost to families.

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From a central office in Charlotte, Freedom School Partners works with the Children's Defense Fund and local schools, hires college interns and staff, coordinates logistics, and secures supplemental funding from the community and private foundations. The site partners — churches, synagogues, community centers, schools and universities — provide the major funding for the summer program hosted at their facility and are responsible for volunteer support. "The site partners bring the gifts they have to the table to make the literacy program work," McPherson says. "Our ideal model is building a community of people around public education, and around children and families who need support."

FSP provides transportation to and from the program sites as well as free breakfast, lunch and healthy snacks. Following breakfast, the day begins with Harambee, an energetic session of chanting and dancing that sets a tone of encouragement and support. Each day includes time for individual and group reading, discussion and activities to bring the books alive, and afternoon field trips or hands-on projects. Weekly parent workshops and plenty of volunteer opportunities engage parents as well as members of the site partner's community.

Summer magic

Interns, many of whom are first-generation college students, serve as teachers during classroom activities and as mentors throughout the summer session. These Servant Leader Interns first attend a weeklong session in Tennessee, hosted by the Children's Defense Fund, which includes training on all aspects of the program model. An additional week of training takes place in Charlotte.

Children and interns form close bonds, and the experience can have a powerful impact in the lives of both, McPherson says. "There is magic that happens in the summer," she adds. "It happens for children, it happens for college students, and it happens for the community that engages them."

Eliminating summer reading loss

A program evaluation conducted by the Center for Adolescent Literacies at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, over these summers found that 90% of scholars either maintained or improved in reading proficiency. More than 60% showed moderate to significant gains. During the 2011 session, scholars in grades K–2 gained on average just under a full year — in contrast to the average loss of two months in reading achievement over the summer by low-income children.

Each week, the FSP scholars bring home at least one book for their personal library. One parent told of becoming concerned when she couldn't find her child after searching the neighborhood. "I looked everywhere," the mom recalled. "When I finally did find her, she was curled up in bed with her book. She'd never done that before."

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

In 2009–2011, Freedom School Partners' summer program helped:

- **90% of enrolled children (grades K–8) maintain or gain in their reading ability.**
- **61% show moderate to significant reading gains.**
- **Children in grades 3–5 gain an average of over a year in reading.**
- **Children in grades K–2 gain an average of just under a year in reading.**

HIGHLIGHTS

Freedom School Partners:

- **Provides transportation plus breakfast, lunch and snacks.**
- **Makes the program available at no charge to families.**
- **Gives each child 1–2 books weekly for their personal libraries.**
- **Hires one college intern for every 10 children.**
- **Made an average of 95% of parents more willing to volunteer in their child's class.**
- **Recorded more than 3,600 hours of volunteer work in 2011.**
- **Had 64% of its 2010 college volunteers or interns return in 2011.**