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Why Black Lives (and Minds) Matter: Race, Freedom Schools & the Quest for Educational Equity

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A number of challenges continue to influence the schooling experience of Black students. While some progress has been made for some, chronic underperformance has remained largely unchanged over the past two decades. What has become increasingly a part of the experiences of Black children and other students of color has been the increasing police presence in schools. In 2015 attention was brought to the presence of police in schools when a South Carolina officer violently removed and slammed a young girl from her desk for defiant behavior in a case that garnered national attention. In this work, the salience and purpose of school police is examined, and in response to the current state of affairs, Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools are offered and discussed as a way of reimagining schools for Black children free of police presence and as a way to re-center learning, literacy and culture.

Keywords: Black students, literacy, policing schools

In 2013 in response to a preponderance of violence and unaccounted for destruction of Black lives in the United States, in particular unarmed Black men and boys being murdered at the hands of police and law enforcement, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was born. In a period of two brief years, the Black Lives Matter movement became an international, politically driven activist movement that says it campaigns, organizes, and protests against violence toward Black people. One of the primary foci of BLM has been protest around the shootings of Black people at the hands of the police and police brutality that has been rampant in this country for centuries, but has become increasingly visible over the past two decades in what is purported to be a civil and democratic society (Marable, 2007). The Black Lives Matter movement began with the use of the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter on social media and gained increased and intense attention after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. The Black Lives Matter movement gained additional attention after the 2014 deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in New York City, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, and Ezell Ford in Los Angeles when supporters spoke out vehemently about the senseless murders of unarmed Black lives, that did not include any officers being held accountable for these deaths. Several other African Americans who died at the hands of police officers have had their deaths protested by the movement, including Eric Harris, Natasha McKenna, Walter Scott, Janisha Fonville, Jonathan Ferrell, Sandra Bland, Tanisha Anderson, Samuel DuBose and Freddie Gray. The Black Lives Matter movement calls itself a decentralized network, enhanced by social media, with no formal or designated hierarchy, elected leaders or prescribed structure.

A perusal of the Black Lives Matter website (www.blacklivesmatter.com) states that the movement is “unapologetically Black” and has often been described as the Black millennial movement, and not a moment, and on its website it also considers itself the following:

- The Black protest movement of the 21st century
- Intersectional, Intergenerational
• Family affirming, queer affirming
• Empathetic and global.

Mobilizing through social media, organizing around police brutality, anti-Black racism, blatant racism, and seeking for justice to be recognized where justice has been denied, the movement has gained in scope and attention beyond police brutality. The organization's website states that Black Lives Matter is:

a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of black people by police and vigilantes.

... Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all black lives along the gender spectrum.

One of its founders, Alicia Garza (2014) has summed up the philosophy behind Black Lives Matter by stating: “When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity.” It is the aspect of Black people being deprived of “basic human rights and dignity” that serves as the impetus for why BLM’s aims and goals have direct implications for the education of Black children in the U.S. in 2016. It could be stated that the basic dignity that all students deserve has been denied for countless numbers of Black children. Overwhelming data suggest the Black children perhaps more than any other group of students experience unique challenges in schools that interrupt their learning opportunities and hinder their educational outcomes (Carter & Welner, 2013; Howard, 2010, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2015; Nasir, 2012). This article seeks to shed a spotlight on some of the aspects of Black students’ dignity being compromised in their learning pursuits. More specifically this work will have two primary foci, it will: (a) discuss the intense nature of how policing Black children has become increasing commonplace and subsequently influenced the way that they experience schools, and (b) offer Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools as an alternative to how schools can be reimagined to be inclusive, affirming, culturally relevant, and prioritize how Black minds matter.

POLICING BLACK BODIES IN SCHOOLS: DO BLACK MINDS MATTER?

Black Lives Matter is used as a backdrop for this work because it is through the spirit of engaging in actions that help to reclaim humanity and dignity for the education of Black children that is critical in today’s given context. Persistent and seemingly unchanging data over the past three decades has suggested that Black children have been more scrutinized and criminalized in U.S. schools than their peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Advancement Project, 2012; Sussman, 2012). A litany of data have revealed that many Black children enter schools yet experience them quite differently, and have contrasting outcomes than many of their non-Black peers (Howard, 2014; Milner, 2015). The data have often been numbing, and unfortunately has become normalized in many school districts across the nation. Disparate academic outcomes for Black children compared to their peers from other ethnic groups have been persistent (Aud et al, 2010; Howard, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2015a) and remains chronic in a number of key areas such as: less access to high quality, early childhood education opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), disproportionately low reading and math scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, 2015b), less likely to be referred to gifted or talented classes (Ford, 2010), least represented in AP and Honors courses (College Board, 2012), most likely to be in classrooms with under qualified and under prepared classroom teachers (Darling Hammond, 2010), most likely to be suspended and expelled (Losen, 2014), among the lowest graduation rates of any subgroup (Aud et al, 2010; Howard, 2010), and least likely to go to four-year college (Harper & Wood 2016).

The level of scrutiny for Black children usually starts early, occurs frequently, and tends to intensify over time. Data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (2014) reports that Black children currently make up 18% of all preschool age children, but account for 42% of all preschool suspensions. While these data are
not new, what has become more prevalent is an increasing degree of brazen indifference and even direct violence toward Black children in U.S. schools. One example of the disturbing violence took place in October 2015, when a Columbia, South Carolina young Black girl had her teacher notify a school resource officer (SRO) about her refusal to leave the classroom for defiant behavior. According to accounts from several students in the classroom school resource officer Ben Fields arrived to the classroom and asked the young girl to come with him, after the young girl refused, Fields responded by physically removing the student from her desk, and then brutally slamming her to the ground in an incident that garnered national attention. As the incident unfolded at Spring Valley High School, other students in the class recorded the encounter on their cellphones, and the video of the incident went viral (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY1e8qe-208). While Officer Fields was subsequently relieved of his duties as an SRO, the incident raised a number of questions about the appropriateness of policing in U.S. schools, and why such a presence is needed in the first place. The violent handling of Blacks students in schools prompts a number of questions: Is there a correlation between policing of schools where Black and Brown bodies are most present? Are such tactics conducive for what are supposed to be learning environments? While issues of safety are usually the explanation offered for the presence of officers in schools, Officer Fields, who is White, was named as a defendant in a 2013 federal lawsuit (Civil Action Number: 3:07-3782-JFA) that claims he “unfairly and recklessly targets African-American students with allegations of gang membership and criminal gang activity.” Some might claim that Black students are unfairly targeted in schools by school officers in ways that contribute to the start and sustaining of the criminalizing of students. The South Carolina incident embodies a growing preponderance of police officers where Black children are most likely to attend schools, that requires further scrutiny, and alternatives to such approaches must be offered.

POLICING PRESENCE IN U.S. SCHOOLS: SECURITY OR SURVEILLANCE?

While the issues in South Carolina raised many questions and concerns, a much larger analysis and discussion is warranted about the need for heavy presence of law enforcement officials in learning environments (Burke, 2001). Many experts trace the increasing law enforcement presence in schools to the Columbine, Colorado shooting incident of 1999. The shooting at Columbine High School led to an intense reinforcement of a Zero Tolerance Policy (Pub. L. 103-382, Title I, § 101, October 20, 1994, 198 Stat. 3907) environment to crack down on school violence and subsequently a notable increase in SROs after the federal government provided additional resources for states and districts for stepped-up security in schools. Under the mantra of the nationwide Zero Tolerance Policy, many schools significantly increased their security measures including, but not limited to, metal detectors in schools, armed police officers, random searches of student’s backpacks and other belongings, random drug and weapon searches, and a considerable increase in the number of school suspensions and expulsions (Brown, 2006; Losen, 2014). As a result, where school discipline was handled in previous years by teachers and school administrators, these matters have been passed on to school police officers, city and county police officers, and SROs, most of whom have little to no training in education settings, human and child development, or a general awareness of the types of adolescent behaviors that are common place in schools. In short, the criminalizing of students in learning spaces was officially sanctioned, and Black children became “public enemy number one” in many schools across the nation. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that there are close to 31,000 SROs or other law enforcement officers stationed at U.S. public schools, with another 13,000 sworn law enforcement officers spending at least part of their time at schools (Gray & Lewis, 2015). According to the National Center of Education Statistics some 43% of all U.S. public schools—including 63% of middle and 64% of high schools—had police officers on their grounds during the 2013-2014 school year. This includes more than 46,000 full-time and 36,000 part-time officers (Gray & Lewis, 2015).
What is most disturbing about the increasing presence of law enforcement officials on school grounds is that the disproportionate numbers of police officers who find themselves at low-income, and racially segregated schools, where children of color are most likely to attend. More concerning is the irony that while the majority of mass school shootings that have taken place over the last two decades have been in largely White, middle-class rural or suburban communities (Littleton, Colorado, Newtown, Connecticut, Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas), the increased police presence has been most prevalent in low-income schools, with majority non-White populations. Whether it is a private security guard, school resource officer, or a sworn police officer, students of color are more likely than the White ones to see a police presence in school (Dinkes et al., 2007). Schools where more than 75 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch are much more likely than their more affluent peers to have law enforcement on their grounds full or part time (Brown, 2006). Given the correlation between race and poverty (Milner, 2015), children of color, and more specifically Black and Latino children are the student groups most likely to find themselves on campuses with a heavy law enforcement presence despite the lack of evidence that suggest school shootings or violent events occur on such campuses. Muhammad (2011) has discussed the idea of how the construction of Black criminality was crucial to the making of modern urban America. In short he contends that the emergence of deeply embedded pathological notions of Black people as a dangerous race of criminals by explicit contrast to working-class whites and European immigrants, reveals the influenced urban development and social policies, and how the remnants remain intact today.

While the class/race nexus speaks to the challenge of students learning in schools with heavy police presence, Theriot’s (2009) research contends that the correlation between student race and police presence is a significant factor, while social class and police presence is less salient. In short, his analysis found that the more non-White students in a school, the more likely the school is to have a full-time SRO or private security guard on campus. Zero-tolerance criminal policies have increasingly ensnared young people as the “lock ‘em up’ mentality . . . [of] the adult criminal justice system has also been applied to the juvenile justice system.” (Sussman, 2012, p.795). Each year, roughly 400,000 youth spend time in juvenile detention centers, a number that is rising because, in addition to the effects of school criminalization, juvenile courts are prosecuting and subsequently incarcerating many youth for misconduct that was previously handled informally, without the intervention of the criminal justice system (Newell & Leap, 2013). These approaches have led to the increasing presence of the school-to-prison pipeline that has disproportionately affected, Black, Latino, Southeast Asian and low-income students (Nelson, 2008).

Incidents of police presence in schools are part of a national trend of criminalizing young students. Security measures once primarily associated with the criminal justice system have infiltrated schools, excluding or impeding children from receiving a traditional education and instead:

funnel[ing] them onto a one-way path toward prison. Similarly, critics of zero tolerance school security policies have charged that some of the harsh “methods for responding to school violence may create a restrictive and unnecessarily intrusive atmosphere in an otherwise safe school setting. (Kenney & Watson, 1999, p. 1)

Some civil rights advocates are concerned about the persistent police presence of conditioning young people to not questioning the persistent invasion of space and privacy and the potential of being conditioned to the normalcy of a policed state in schools (Advancement Project, 2012; Little, 2013). What seems to be clear is that while safety is the stated explanation for the presence of officers on schools campuses, consistently across the U.S. Black students appear to disproportionately targeted for police intervention, and often disciplined when intervening for just and adequate treatment of their peers.

In the South Carolina incident, 16-year-old Niya Kenny who was a classmate of the young girl who was slammed and arrested was one of the several students who captured the incident on her cell phone camera. In an interview with The New Yorker,
Kenny offered the disheartening details of the incident before, during and after the altercation. She stated:

They called for a school resource officer. We have two—I didn’t know which one was coming, when I saw it was him (Fields) I told them (her classmates) to get the cameras out, because we know his reputation—well, I know his reputation.

Upon witnessing the incident, Kenny goes on to state:

I just couldn’t believe this was happening. I was just crying and he was like, ‘Since you have so much to say, you coming too . . . You want some of this?’ And he just put my hands behind my back.

Kenny, as well as her classmate were subsequently detained by the SRO for disruption and subordination in the classroom. Kenny’s only offense seemed to be coming to the defense of her classmate who was being manhandled by the SRO. It should be noted that disrupting school is a crime in South Carolina, a misdemeanor carrying a possible penalty of 90 days imprisonment or a $1000 fine. The evidence of further ways of harsh punishment and criminal action is being used toward child behavior is startling and unsettling when one realizes the damage being done to children in the process. In the South Carolina district where the incident occurred, 59 percent of students are Black and 26 percent are White; 77 percent of those suspended at least once in 2011-12 were Black, according to figures compiled by the Justice Department (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c), although details to allow a comparison of the offenses were not readily available. South Carolina relies much more on suspension than the nation as a whole; 24 percent of public school students in the state were suspended at least once that year, compared with 13 percent nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c).

The situation in South Carolina is becoming endemic of other cases across the country where excessive punishment is being administered to youth for what often appears to be typical adolescent behavior, which also seem to have clear racial elements. Other cases of physical discipline include the following:

- In Birmingham, Alabama’s Woodlawn High School authorities discovered that between 2006 and 2011, police repeatedly pepper sprayed students with the chemical Freeze +P, for infractions as minor as back-talking and challenging authority. Police used chemical spray in 110 incidents in which about 300 students were sprayed, and more than 1,000 others were exposed to the spray. Nearly every student sprayed was African American. (https://www.splcenter.org/news/2015/10/01/splc-wins-lawsuit-challenging-use-pepper-spray-alabama-school-district)
- In September of 2015, a 13-year-old Maryland boy was arrested for kissing a female classmate at school, police report. The boy told authorities he sneaked the kiss on a dare from other kids. Baltimore County police and Baltimore County school officials responded with “extreme alarm”: when the boy kissed his classmate at Pikesville Middle School. Baltimore police confirmed that the boy faced a second-degree assault charge as a juvenile for delivering an unwanted kiss to a 14-year-old girl. Police also report that no one was injured during the incident. The school said that at a future date, a determination would be made about whether the boy should be suspended or expelled. (http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/09/12/teenage-boy-in-maryland-arrested-for-assault-for-kissing-girl-in-school/)
- Salecia Johnson, 6, says she couldn’t sleep because of what happened at her school in Milledgeville, Georgia in 2014. “They hurt me. They jerked my hands real fast,” said Johnson. Police said the kindergartner was arrested and taken to police headquarters after she became “a threat to herself and others at Creekside Elementary School.” (http://www.cbs46.com/story/17621353/six-year-old-arrested-at-school-for-temper tantrum-speaks out)
- In November 2015, 7 year-old Caden McCadden was placed in handcuffs in his Flint, Michigan elementary school hallway by School Resource Officers for “unruly behavior” and his refusal to sit down. Even after calming the young boy down, SROs were unable to immediately remove the handcuffs from McCadden for 30 minutes because the officer was unable to locate the keys. (http://fusion.net/story/226648/michigan-boy-adhd-handcuffed-school/)
In perhaps the most infamous case of September 2015, 14-year-old Ahmed Mohamed was arrested in his Irving, Texas classroom for what school authorities believed was “hoax bomb” which was actually a clock that Mohamed made as part of a school assignment. (http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/16/us/texas-student-ahmed-muslim-clock-bomb/)

**BLACK CHILDREN, SCHOOL DISCIPLINE & INCARCERATION**

These incidents raise obvious concerns, and really merit the call for reimagining a different way of doing schooling where Black and other children of color are concerned. The data continues to paint a deeply disturbing picture of how Black children are “seen as a problem” (Howard, 2013) in many U.S. schools. Black children are at greatest risk of being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. According to data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services & the U.S. Department of Education (2014)

- Black students made up only 18 percent of students in public schools in 2012-2013 but were 40 percent of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions.
- While Black children make up approximately 18 % of all students in schools, they make up 32 percent of children arrested and 40 percent of all children and youth in residential placement in the juvenile justice system.

With the highest youth incarceration rate in the world, the U.S. imprisons approximately 54,100 youth nationwide on any given day according to the Casey Foundation (2015). The U.S. juvenile justice system, which began shifting in the 1980s from rehabilitation to a punishment model, has created a broad sense of perpetual surveillance or “a state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault, 1977, p. 189) for thousands of American youth, especially young Black children.

The *exiling* of American youth in the juvenile justice system has dire personal, educational, social, emotional, and economic effects. Some of the negative effects of youth incarceration include: lower educational achievement, higher unemployment, higher alcohol and substance abuse, increased mental health problems, and higher rates of learning disabilities (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). Studies have also documented the high costs of incarcerating youth; when youths pay for crime by being incarcerated, taxpayers, too, bear some of the burden. Locking up a juvenile costs states an average of $407.58 per person per day, $36,682 for 3 months, $73,364 for 6 months, and $148,767 per person per year when the most expensive option is used, according to a new report by the Justice Policy Institute (2014). As the country debates the cost effectiveness of mass incarceration the report notes that jailing youths carries its own exorbitant price tag; approximately 21 billion dollars annually by some estimates. Youth incarceration has proven to be both harmful and costly, and not rehabilitative. This year, the number of youth detained has started dropping as states have begun to recognize both the short-term and long-term ineffectiveness of incarceration as well as its deleterious impact. Nevertheless, racial disparities continue to increase.

**REIMAGINING EDUCATION: THE FREEDOM SCHOOLS WAY**

In light of the current circumstances that many students face in schools, a pressing need exists for bold and creative ways of thinking about how schools can be supportive, caring, and nurturing spaces. In short, re-imagined schools that embrace racial and cultural identities may offer students liberating ways of pursuing academic success within environments where academic success is the norm, and issues of policing and criminalization are non-existent. To that end, the Children Defense Fund’s (CDF) *Freedom Schools* program, (http://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/freedomschools/?referrer=https://www.google.com/) which is a six-week literacy enrichment program for school-aged children may offer such a solution. Historically, the primary goal of the CDF *Freedom Schools* program was to help prevent summer reading-loss. Other program goals include increasing “children’s love of reading, self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning.” To achieve these goals, the CDF *Freedom Schools* model engages students (who are referred to as scholars), schools, families,
and communities (who are referred to as servant leader interns) through an integrated curriculum that supports scholars around five essential components:

1. High quality academic enrichment
2. Social action and civic engagement
3. Intergenerational servant leadership development
4. Nutrition, health and mental health
5. Parent and family involvement

The key features of the CDF Freedom Schools program that make it different from other summer literacy programs is that it consists of the following features:

- **“Harambee! (Let’s Pull Together)”**: Harambee emanates from African cultures and involves a series of positive cheers and chants that are self-affirming, followed by positive shout outs known as “recognitions.” It entails a 30-minute activity in which scholars, staff, and guests sing motivational songs, cheers and chants, read aloud, and share a moment of reflection.
- **Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC)**: a program where scholars read culturally relevant books that reflect their images and focus around themes such as *I can make a difference, Something inside so strong, or I know I can be what I want to be.*
- **D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) Time**: an activity that occurs right before lunch where scholars and staff drop everything and read for 15 minutes.
- Respectful, caring, affirming and nurturing treatment of scholars that builds on cultural knowledge and community literacies.

Since 1995, more than 135,000 PreK-12 scholars have experienced Freedom Schools and more than 18,000 college students and recent graduates have been prepared by CDF to serve as teachers (referred to as servant leader interns or SLIs) deliver an empowering model of education that builds on students’ strengths, connects culture to cognition, and prioritizes their learning in a civically engaged and transformative way. What is also unique about Freedom Schools is the non-punitive, holistic approach to teaching and learning. Freedom Schools provide a way of reimagining schools where students are seen through a much more humane prism built on equity, acceptance, and fairness; something many of the students do not experience in their traditional schools. The “Freedom Schools way” as it is often referenced by staff and scholars is built on principles of respect, honor and commitment to justice, and learning in a culturally supportive and affirming manner. Moreover, the pedagogy that informs the Freedom School way is tied to the understanding that all children possess the capacity to learn, and SLIs do just that—“serve” students. Disruptive behaviors are not met with removal from learning environments, suspensions, or expulsions, but are addressed through a community-centered and restorative justice approach of trying to understand root causes of scholars’ behavior, and identifying workable approaches to support students’ needs. An observation in a Freedom School classroom reveals a level of activity, vibrancy, engagement, energy, and student-to-teacher interaction that is palpable (Jackson & Howard, 2014). Over the past five years, Freedom Schools have been in operation at six different sites across Los Angeles County. The following section, shares the most recent data from those sites that operated during the summer of 2015. The data will focus on one of the five core areas, high quality academic enrichment (reading achievement).

**High Quality Academic Enrichment (Scholar Reading Achievement)**

During the summer of 2014, a total of 117 scholars participated in the Los Angeles Freedom Schools. To gauge scholars reading proficiency, they were administered the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI, Johns, 2012) reading assessment at the beginning and end of CDF Freedom Schools. The BRI is an individually administered formal reading assessment used to help gather information for instructional decision making in reading. Scholars who participated in the summer of 2014 ranged in age from 4 to 18 years, with approximately 73% of the scholars being between 4–11 years old, and 27% being 12–18 years old. More than one-half of the scholars (59%) identified as African American/Black, and 14% identified as Latino/Hispanic. Seven
percent indicated they were Asian, White, or other, 11% indicated that they were multiracial, and 9% selected “don’t know.” Fifty-three percent of scholars were female and 47% were male.

Given the salience of literacy development of scholars in the Freedom Schools program, reading is given a high priority at all sites. Four schools engaged testing coordinators who were trained by CDF to sample and administer selected components of the BRI. The Instructional Level, scored by CDF, is the level at which the student can make maximum progress in reading with instructional guidance. All quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0; http://www-01.ibm.com/software/analytics/spss/products/statistics/). For several program components, pre- and post-data were available. Data were categorized into positive or negative responses (likely and very likely v. unlikely and very unlikely or agree and strongly agree v. disagree and strongly disagree) and for scholars whose data matched, were compared using the chi square statistic. For all stakeholders, descriptive analysis was conducted on post-data only. In addition, qualitative data from the open-ended survey items were coded and themed in Microsoft Access. Lastly, audiotaped focus groups and individual staff interviews were transcribed verbatim and content analyzed.

The data revealed that scholars’ interest in reading was high and was further increased by the end of the program. BRI instructional reading level increased by one or more grade levels in 64% of the scholars. More than one-half of the scholars (57%) felt they were better readers by the end of the program, and 50% reported reading 3 to 5+ times per week on the post survey. Parents were also extremely positive (97% agreement) about the quality of academic instruction that their children received and more than one-half of parents (57%) felt that their children read at a higher level after attending the Freedom School program. In addition, ninety-five percent of the staff felt the program generated more interest in reading among scholars.

**Attitudes toward Reading**

At the end of the CDF Freedom Schools program, scholars’ composite attitudes toward reading were 85% positive, with more than two-thirds of scholars indicating they were somewhat interested or very interested in reading. Pre- and post-survey comparison results of individual survey items measuring attitude toward reading show that scholars entered the program with quite positive attitudes toward reading and, in most cases, maintained their positive attitudes at the program’s conclusion. Scholars’ post-survey positive responses to how they felt about reading a book for fun (96%), learning new things (90%), getting a book for a present (76%), interest in being a good reader (67%) and reading aloud (65%) as shown in Figure 1.

**Reading Behaviors**

The reading behaviors of scholars were the same or improved after completing the Freedom Schools program. Survey results showed that at the end of the program, 88% of scholars felt that what they learned in Freedom School would help them do better in school next year and 84% had books at home that they enjoyed reading. The percentage of scholars who read for fun increased slightly by the end of the program, with 50% reporting reading 3 to 5+ times per week (v. 49% on the pre-survey). According to scholars, the frequency of their parents reading to them 3 to 5+ times per week decreased slightly, from 20% on the pre-survey to 17% on the post-survey. A larger percentage of parents reported that they read to their child 3 to +5 times per week, at 46% on the pre-survey and 54% on the post-survey. Parents were extremely positive about the presence of books in the home that their children enjoyed reading (96% agreement), and 54% of parents observed that their children read for fun 2 to 3+ times per week.

**Reading Achievement**

Perhaps the most notable data point from the reading data were the pre- and post-BRI reading assessments conducted at four Freedom Schools under the direction of CDF. Instructional reading scores (the point at which teachers can start to work with readers for improvement) were obtained, and increased significantly from pre-to post-administration. Approximately 64% of
scholars increased one or more grade levels in instructional reading skill ranging at the four schools from 50% to 76%. Levels 1 and 3 scholars demonstrated the greatest increases (71% to 74% of scholars’ level increased).

Scholar Focus Groups

Over the course of the summer, evaluators conducted focus groups with a random cross section of scholars from Levels 1 to 4 (n = 72). The purpose of the focus groups was to gain a more in-depth and introspective account of how the scholars described and made meaning of their Freedom Schools’ experience. In addition, the focus groups were designed to provide insight into critical information that scholars took away from the program. Focus group comments from scholars were equally positive about the impact of the program on reading attitudes and behaviors, as evidenced by one scholar who stated “I have started reading more and enjoyed reading more since I’ve gotten here...” Another scholar who was a Level 2 (grade 4) contended that, “The books we read are really good, and it’s a really good experience. It’s educational for your brain.” Several of the students spoke about how demonstrating success in Freedom Schools was different than in their regular schools, and they enjoyed showing academic success. Riley, a fourth grader stated:

It [Freedom School] actually made me think reading is more cool cause I actually never liked reading... it [reading] makes me learn new things and takes me to new places. I wish it was like this in my regular school.

What was also evident from the focus group data was the manner in which it appeared the scholars’ confidence seems to grow and how it made them feel better about their reading skills. One scholar said, “It makes me feel good that I know how to read, and reading makes me feel smart. I’m another grade level above when I came here, so I know it works.”

Ashleigh, a 7th grader, who stated that she did not necessarily like reading that much in school, talked about how Freedom Schools helped her in ways that previous teachers did not, by showing her “how to break down words and sounds” and that as a result she “think Freedom Schools have made me a more confident reader.” Comments such as these seem to suggest that the approaches to literacy development resonated with students, captured their imaginations, and helped them to cultivate basic reading skills that many seemed to lack from previous years of schooling.

In response to the end-of-program query “What did you like best about Freedom School?” some scholars mentioned learning how to read, sitting down and reading a book, reading books...
that are very interesting and fun, and reading a lot. One scholar, who was entering the second grade, quipped, “Since I have been coming to Freedom School, instead of playing video games or watching TV, I just sit down and read a book.” Other scholars talked about “reading about Black people,” “learning about our culture” or “its reading stuff that we can relate to” as reasons for their increased levels of engagement and effort in reading. At a time when a disproportionately high number of Black students at all grade levels fall behind their peers in reading proficiency, the Freedom Schools approach to literacy would seem to offer important skills and strategies for schools to consider. A literacy-based approach centered on affirming language, diverse literacies, and student culture appears to have a positive influence on how scholars think about themselves as learners, writers, readers, and thinkers.

Other notable takeaways and key data points from Freedom Schools’ data were in the following areas.

**Parent involvement.** Scholars, parents, and staff all reported high levels of parent involvement with Freedom Schools. Ninety-nine percent of parents, 92% percent of staff members, and 76% of scholars indicated that their parents were involved in Freedom Schools. Ninety-seven percent of parents were highly satisfied with the information they received at parent meetings, 95% felt they had a voice in their child’s experience at Freedom Schools, and 94% felt the scheduling of meetings was convenient. Overall, 99% of parents agreed their needs and concerns were addressed.

**Social action and civic engagement.** On the post-survey, 92% of scholars expressed their desire to become more involved in their community. At the conclusion of Freedom Schools, 96% of parents and 84% of staff agreed that the scholars showed greater interest in giving back to their communities. In regard to the National Day of Social Action, 90% of parents and staff felt their participation in it was worthwhile. All of the staff members who responded to the survey indicated that because of Freedom Schools, they wanted to work harder to make a positive change in their community and 81% of staff reported being very likely to become more involved in the education system as a result of their involvement with Freedom Schools.

**Intergenerational servant leadership development.** The majority of the scholars (92%) indicated on the post-surveys that overall, the Freedom Schools’ servant leader interns were friendly, set a good example, and made them feel good about themselves. The Freedom Schools experience also supported scholars in working with peers, with 97% indicating that they made new friends. From the perspective of staff, 91% agreed that Freedom Schools helped scholars get along better with others.

**Conclusions and Moving Forward**

Given the increasing criminalization of youth in schools, and Black youth in particular it is imperative to make strong advocacy stands toward decriminalizing student behavior, and identifying new ways of engaging student in learning. While a growing number of scholars have called for an end to the school-to-prison pipeline (Advancement Project, 2012; Noguera, 2014), some districts have paid more attention to their punishment and disciplinary procedures in an effort to reduce schools suspensions and expulsions, which have had a deleterious impact on Black children in particular. In lieu of punishing students, there has been a greater call for incorporating more restorative justice approaches to school discipline (Elliott & Gordon, 2005), helping teachers identify better skills, strategies, and resources to respond to student behavior (Zygmunt & Clark, 2015), helping practitioners develop personalization for academic and social emotional learning (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, & Roberts, 2016), and taking a more focused approach on the role that trauma has on young people (Craig, 2016), and how that may be influencing student behavior, and the development of a more culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010) that may engage students, decreased discipline issues, and subsequently improve academic outcomes. To that end, I would offer key areas that need to be more commonplace in schools where Black children are present. A focus on these areas would be significant steps in the right
direction of ameliorating the chronic gaps in school experiences and outcomes that have plagued Black children for the last several decades:

- Eliminate the decriminalization of low-level behaviors that pose no public safety threat to students, teachers or staff, such as “willful defiance” or “violating dress codes,” “talking back to teachers” and prohibit the application of vague offenses like “disorderly conduct” or “disturbing the peace” to student conduct on school campus. Reduce the ability of school personnel to refer cases of student behavior to juvenile court for minor offenses.
- Eradicate zero-tolerance policies, and develop more culturally sustaining and appropriate pedagogies centered on students' ways of knowing, communicating, and learning.
- Center literacy, learning, and culture as a central focus for young learners. An explicit focus on literacy in early childhood education is essential for ensuring students do not fall behind early, where they rarely catch up to their peers.
- Ensure that suspensions, expulsions, and arrests can only be used where immediate safety threats exist and where no other interventions are available.
- Put a focus on addressing the prevalence of trauma for students, and ensure appropriate supports are in place for students, parents, families, and school personnel.

At a time where there is a focus on the importance of Black lives, it is imperative to help educators at all levels also to recognize that Black minds matter too. Black minds require care, concern, and proper cultivating from educators at all levels. There needs to be an unapologetic and explicit focus on the most scrutinized and marginalized students in schools. The transformation of learning spaces from criminal focused environments where students' humanity is affirmed is long overdue for all students in schools. The time to act is now, models exist that offer us a viable blueprint, and students are waiting for educators to act in a bold and unremorseful manner.

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