

Empowering the next generation through the CDF Freedom Schools® Program

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
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Close your eyes and think about the words summer school. What comes to mind?

If you picture a room full of children clapping, chanting, laughing and learning to fall in love with books and reading, you could be imagining the experience thousands of children across the country are about to have over the next few months as they participate in the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program.

Proudly rooted in the American Civil Rights Movement and the courageous efforts of college-age youths to make a difference, the CDF Freedom Schools program provides summer and after-school enrichment through a model curriculum that supports children and families around five essential components: high quality academic enrichment; parent and family involvement; social action and civic engagement; intergenerational servant leadership development; and nutrition, health and mental health.

Through partnerships with community-based organizations, faith institutions, municipalities, schools, colleges and universities, the CDF Freedom Schools program boosts student motivation to read, generates positive attitudes toward learning, and connects the needs of children and families to the resources in their communities.

The CDF Freedom Schools model incorporates the totality of the Children's Defense Fund's mission by fostering environments that encourage children and young adults to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves and in their families, schools, communities, nation and world, through hope, education and action. Since 1995, more than 70,000 children and families have been touched by the CDF Freedom Schools experience, and more than 7,000 college students and 1,500 adults have been trained to deliver this approach to child empowerment. We plan to serve nearly 9,000 children at 142 program sites in 75 cities in the summer of 2009.

CDF Freedom Schools sites are safe and restorative learning spaces where children are surrounded by caring adults from their community who share their enthusiasm for learning and reading with children and commit to serving them as authentic mentors. CDF Freedom Schools programs are staffed primarily by college-age young adults who are committed to making life better for children. Training coordinated by the CDF Freedom Schools national office prepares them to provide an enriching experience for the children they serve and to be part of a future generation of servant leaders.

The Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute promotes principles of servant leadership by fostering an understanding of the connection between effective programs and public policy and the importance of community development, political advocacy and coalition building.

The strong ethic of service is evident across generations as community leaders support these servant leaders while they teach and mentor the children in their charge. In the CDF Freedom Schools program, children are engaged in activities that develop their minds and bodies, and nurture their spirits.

Children receive two nutritious meals and a healthy snack every day in the summer program

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and snacks in the after-school sessions. Each day begins with “Harambee!” a self- and group-affirming celebration and preparation for the work ahead. Children, parents and staff are introduced to a superb collection of books that reflect their own images and are part of an integrated reading curriculum in which books, activities, field trips and games all relate to and reinforce each other.

The servant leader interns use this curriculum to teach the children conflict resolution and critical thinking skills, encourage them to participate in art and athletic activities, engage them in community service and social action projects, and inspire them not only to explore the problems facing their communities, but also to become active in working toward solutions.

Children are encouraged to dream, set goals for themselves, and cultivate positive attitudes and high expectations.

Parents and family members are the most important partners in their children’s education, and the CDF Freedom Schools program offers them the support and skills they need to help their children succeed. Caregivers are required to demonstrate their commitment to the program by becoming actively involved in the daily CDF Freedom Schools activities. Family members also participate in weekly workshops where they learn about children’s educational and social development and gain the necessary skills to empower them to help their children.

CDF Freedom Schools programs serving distressed children and families are encouraged to incorporate therapeutic interventions and health and mental health services, and youths whose lives have been affected by crises receive consistent, daily service to help them better understand themselves, their situations and their potential.

For example, our CDF Freedom Schools Emergency Katrina Projects in Mississippi and Louisiana became a model for serving children and youths affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Where will the children in your community go once school’s out? A summer spent at a CDF Freedom Schools site can have a lasting impact. Opportunities like the quality after-school and summer enrichment offered by the CDF Freedom Schools program need to be available to many more children who can benefit from them and find safe haven from the streets.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation , is
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