Freedom School Partners
Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program
Evaluation Report

Submitted
by
The Center for Adolescent Literacies

Written by

D. Bruce Taylor, Ph.D.

Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, Ph.D.

September, 2021

Table of Contents

Tables

Figures

Appendices

Freedom School Partners Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program
Summer 2021 Evaluation Report

OVERVIEW

Over the past 13 years, the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte has conducted 11 program evaluations for the Freedom School Partners' Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® programs in Charlotte, N.C. The focus of these evaluations has been on reading outcomes of Scholars (youth participants) in the program and, more recently to include data on Scholar and Servant Leader Interns (SLI) experiences. We report here on the reading outcomes for Level I, Level II and Level III Scholars in eight Charlotte Freedom School program sites during the Summer of 2021 using the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory* (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013). Additionally, we provide a snapshot of some of the previous year's outcomes and a review of published research related to reading and summer learning loss.

Freedom School Partners' CDF Freedom Schools Program

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is a private, nonprofit child advocacy organization that was founded in 1973 to champion the rights of all children, especially those living in poverty. Based in Washington, DC, CDF grew out of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Marian Wright Edelman, founder and former president of CDF. The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission states that it seeks "to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start,* a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities."[1] CDF describes Freedom School as a program that "seeks to build strong, literate, and empowered children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation and world today." Freedom School is a summer program with a mission of empowerment that includes a significant focus on literacy.

Created by the Children's Defense Fund, the Freedom Schools program engages children in grades K-12[2] in a six-week summer program designed to prevent the "learning loss" that students (known as Scholars in the program) typically experience over the months when school is not in session. The Freedom Schools program also aims to have a positive impact on children's character development, leadership, and community involvement. The CDF Freedom Schools program provides enrichment with the stated goals of "helping children fall in love with reading, increase[ing] their self-esteem, and generate[ing] more positive attitudes toward

[1] Information about the Children's Defense Fund and its programs is available at the CDF website: http://www.childrensdefense.org/.
[2] Grade and age ranges vary by Freedom School site. Some programs serve children across the K-12 span while others focus on K-5 or K-8.

learning." CDF reports that more than 150,000 children in grades K-12 have participated in Freedom Schools programs since its inception in 1995. Data from CDF was not available for Summer 2021 Freedom School programs nationally at the time of this report, but in 2019, there were 12,138 Scholars in Freedom School programs in 97 cities and 28 states including Washington D.C. The Scholars are grouped by grade levels with Level I Scholars having just completed Kindergarten, first, or second grade. Level II Scholars come from grades three through five and Level III Scholars from grades six through eight. There is a Level IV high school program at some sites nationally, including some Charlotte sites, but that group was not included in this evaluation.

The Freedom Schools programs provide a literature-based reading program called the Integrated Reading Curriculum or IRC. About 80 books are on the IRC's booklist and these books feature the work of many well-known authors. CDF has developed six weeks of lesson plans for approximately half of the books to help staff and Scholars reflect on the themes *I Can Make a Difference in: My Self, My Family, My Community, My Country, and My World with Hope, Education, and Action*. The remaining titles are used to create on-site libraries of books for use during silent sustained reading and read-alouds, as well as for research on history and community service projects. Servant Leader Interns are recruited and provided with training that includes how to implement the Integrated Reading Curriculum. The majority of Interns are college-age students.

In Charlotte, CDF Freedom Schools are hosted by Freedom School Partners (FSP), a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1999 that is dedicated to serving children and families living in poverty. FSP's mission is to "promote the long-term success of children by preventing summer learning loss through igniting a passion for reading and inspiring a love of learning." FSP began hosting Freedom Schools programs in 2004 at one location serving 100 scholars. In 2021, Freedom Schools served 10 sites and approximately 400 Scholars. FSP partners with community groups, faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, and corporations, which provide volunteer and financial support.

In most years, Freedom School sites in Charlotte range in size from approximately 50 to 100 scholars and operate five days a week, from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. In 2021, sites were scaled back to between 20 and 50 students to address safety concerns due to COVID19. As with other years, transportation is provided, and Scholars are served breakfast, lunch and a snack. Freedom Schools programs are offered at no charge to participating families beyond a $40 per family enrollment fee. Parents are asked to attend parent meetings and volunteer with the program.

A typical day in a Freedom School program follows a pattern. After breakfast, the Scholars, site coordinator, and Interns come together for Harambee, a Kiswahili word for "let's pull

together." Harambee is a time of celebration and affirmation akin to a daily pep-rally that includes songs, chants, and a read-aloud of a short book by a community member. Integrated Reading Curriculum, or IRC, follows Harambee. During IRC, students go to their classrooms with their Intern for a 2-1/2 hour period of literacy activities built around the reading of culturally diverse books. The program typically has a 1:10 Intern to Scholar ratio but in 2021 that was reduced to a 1:8 ratio. During IRC Scholars and Interns read, discuss, and engage in activities drawn from the books. Following IRC, Scholars participate in D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) time, a daily period of silent reading where Scholars are able to self-select books. Following IRC, Scholars eat lunch and engage in afternoon enrichment activities. The enrichment activities vary by site include a mix of traditional summer activities such as sports but also yoga, cooking and hands-on projects, and co-curricular activities that include an academic focus. In 2021 all activities were held on site and off-site field trips were excluded.

Evaluation History

As has been noted, this research builds on research conducted over a 13-year period including a pilot evaluation conducted at two Freedom School sites during the summer of 2009. The evaluation was extended to additional sites after 2009 in order to provide a larger sample size to provide statistical significance in the findings. Eight or more sites have been included in the evaluation since 2010. As we explain below, no evaluation was conducted in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic and modifications in delivery were made to the program and to evaluation methods in 2021 (see below).

Two reading assessment measures have been used to capture pre/post data in these evaluations. The *Basic Reading Inventory* (BRI) 9th Edition (2008) and 10th Edition (2010) Form A and B were used between 2009 and 2015[3]. In 2016, the BRI was used at 14 sites while the *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory* or ESRI (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013) was piloted at four sites. Following a review of results along with an analysis of the implementation from the BRI and ESRI in 2016, the ESRI was chosen as the assessment tool and has been used since 2017.

The findings across all evaluation years have remained relatively consistent. Between 80% and 90% of Freedom School Scholars increased or maintained their reading level as measured by the BRI and the ESRI across two measures of reading—the Independent Level (the level at which a child can read on their own) and the Frustration Level (the level at which a child cannot read successfully even with support). Figure 1 provides information about the percentages of Scholars who showed losses, maintained, or showed gains in reading at the Independent Level using the ESRI between 2016 and 2019.

Figure 1. 2016-2019 Independent Level Results from the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory*

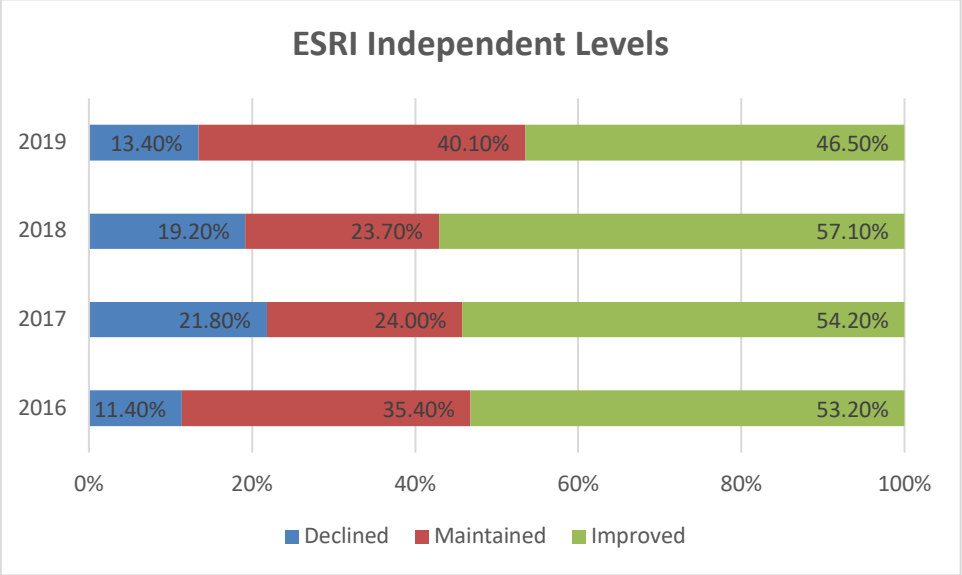
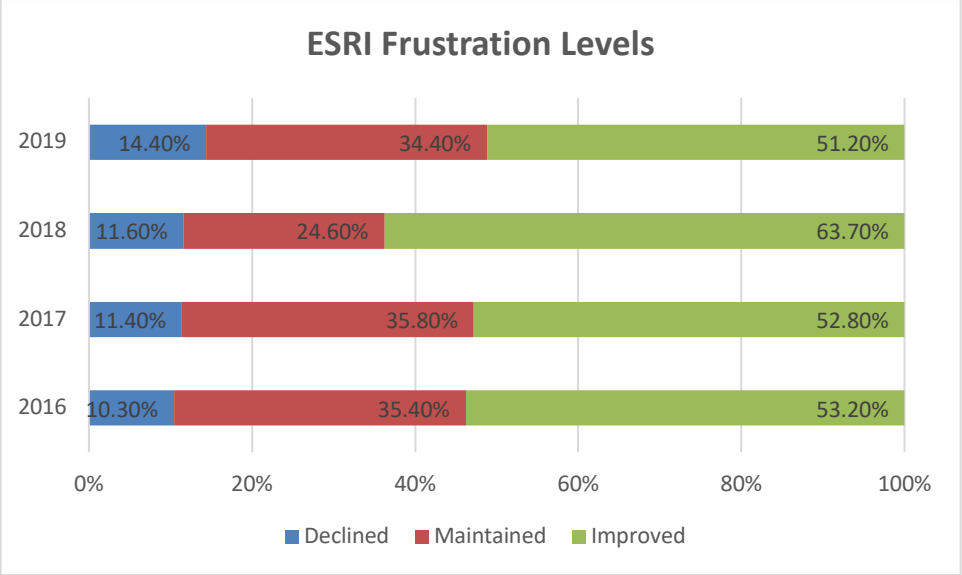


Figure 2 provides a snapshot of Frustration Level reading for the ESRI between 2016 and 2019.

Figure 2. 2016-2019 Frustration Level Results from the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory*



Important data were gathered in 2010 regarding Scholars' attitudes towards the reading component of Freedom Schools with the overwhelming majority demonstrating positive attitudes towards the program (as determined in an analysis of Scholar interviews). The

Scholars' comments pointed to the engaging nature of the books and activities that are part of the IRC and to the role of the Servant Leader Interns as positive aspects of the program.

Below is an overview of the research objectives and design, followed by findings and a discussion of results. We have created an Appendix section with a review of related research about summer learning loss at the end of the report that is updated each year.

Changes in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic

As has been noted, Freedom Schools scaled back and made some modifications during 2021 that impacted both the program at sites and the evaluation. There were fewer program sites (N = 10 in 2021 vs. N = 18 is 2019) and enrollments (N = 400 Scholars in 2021 vs. N = 1,300 in 2019) were lower due, in part, to Camp CMS summer programs operated by Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools and open to more students than in years past. It is reasonable to assume that other factors (ex., families keeping children home to avoid transmission of COVID-19) also contributed to lower enrollments.

Freedom School Partners and its community partners decided to keep classes smaller to allow for increased social distancing as part of its COVID-19 protocols. Masks were required for students, staff, and visitors when indoors. As has been noted, the Freedom School program was contained to its sites with no off-site field trips as in previous years.

.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

History

Research documenting reading outcomes for Freedom School Scholars goes back to 2005 with an evaluation of the program by the Kansas City Freedom School Initiative, which demonstrated a significant improvement in reading abilities for Freedom School Scholars. UNC Charlotte was the first to evaluate outcomes for participating Scholars in Charlotte. In early 2009, Freedom School Partners approached the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institute for Social Capital, Inc. (ISC) to develop an outcome evaluation for the program. A pilot program evaluation was conducted at two Freedom Schools sites in summer 2009. Results from the pilot evaluation were promising. This pilot evaluation showed that of the 51 participants in grades two through five, 57% showed an increase in their reading levels as assessed in the *Basic Reading Inventory*, 10th Edition (Johns, 2008). Twenty-nine percent maintained their reading performance and just under 14% showed some decline. The promising pilot evaluation results led to the continuation of program evaluation.

In 2010, Freedom School Partners contracted with the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte to implement an outcome evaluation project to examine the effect of Freedom Schools on children participating at all 10 FSP Freedom Schools sites. The program evaluation sought to assess the extent to which the CDF Freedom Schools program met the following objectives for the K-8 Scholars enrolled:

- To increase children's reading performances
- To maintain or to increase children's reading levels from the end of the school year until the beginning of the following school year
- To increase children's "love" of reading

Present Evaluation – Summer 2021

This year's evaluation continues with a pre/posttest format at eight Freedom School sites in Charlotte using the ESRI to understand how participation in Freedom School affected the reading performance of Scholars during the summer of 2021. This year's report includes an evaluation of Level I, Level II and Level III Scholars at these eight sites.

This evaluation was guided by the following questions:

- *Did Level I, Level II and Level III Freedom School Scholars show any change in their Independent and Frustration reading levels from pre- to posttest as measured by the Ekwall/Shanker Inventory (ESRI)?*
    - Specifically, did children exhibit a change in reading performance over time?
    - If there was a change, was the change from pretest to posttest statistically significant?
    - What proportion of Freedom School Scholars maintained or improved reading performance over time?
    - Did differences in performance over time differ by Scholar demographic characteristics? If so, how?

METHODS

Procedures

Because of the program's structure, this evaluation used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, with no control or comparison group. Scholars were enrolled by Freedom Schools Program staff at each of the 10 total sites in 2021. This is a reduction in the number of sites and Scholars (N = 400 total Scholars in 2021) from previous years. For example, in 2019, Freedom Schools served 18 sites and more than 1,300 Scholars. As discussed above, these reductions in numbers of sites and Scholars served was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At those sites, Freedom School Partners obtained consent from families to allow their child/Scholar to participate in the evaluation. Sampling was stratified by level, gender, and ethnicity (see Table 1). A total of 130 scholars across eight study sites were enrolled in summer 2021. While the goal was to assess all Scholars, we began by random selection based on the stratified sampling plan described above. Scholars were informed that their participation was voluntary. Those who agreed to participate provided verbal assent at the time of the assessment.

Table 1. Criteria for Stratification

Criteria			
Level	I (K-2)	II (3-5)	III (6-8)
Gender	Male Female	Male Female	Male Female
Ethnicity	African-American Hispanic Other	African-American Hispanic Other	African-American Hispanic Other

Sample

Data collection was conducted from June 15, 2021 to July 20, 2021. As a precaution against COVID-19 transmission, Plexiglass barriers were set up between Scholars and assessors, so while assessors wore masks on site generally, they were able to remove them during assessment. Scholars were given the option to remove their masks during assessment.

The pretest was administered in June and the posttest was conducted in July. Of the 314 scholars on the initial enrollment list and 11 who were present after the initial enrollment data was provided (N = 325), 189 (58.2%) were present and assessed on the days scheduled for the pretest. Due to absences, election to participate in other summer programs, etc., 136 Scholars were not present or pretested. Of the 189 assessed, 130 Scholars assessed at both times, 95 (73.1%) had complete pre- and posttest data. Lack of complete pre-post data was due largely (n = 33) to Scholars' inability to achieve the basal level required to receive a pre-primer score or

zero recode score on a test. Absences or withdrawal from the program also contributed to sample size reduction. Thus, this report is based on 95 Scholars with complete pre- and posttest data. Based on G*Power analysis, 164 scholars were needed to detect a small effect (.20) at 80 power using an alpha level of .05. We acknowledge that the final sample does not provide enough power to detect differences in the outcome measures. As stated previously, this year there were fewer sites, summer school programs that likely attracted prospective Scholars, and reduced sizes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes and challenges made it impossible to assess the required number of Scholars needed to detect small effects. Therefore, the findings should be evaluated with extreme caution.

There was a significant association between previous program experience and test completion, with a higher proportion of those with previous experience completing both tests (p = .003). According to the chi-square tests, Scholar grade and level were also significantly associated with complete test data (p < .001), with those in higher grades and levels more likely to have pre-post assessment scores.

Measures

Demographic information. At enrollment, parents provided demographic information about the Scholar, including the age, grade, whether the child had repeated a grade, whether the child had previously participated in the program, and if so, the number of years. Parents also indicated whether the Scholar participated in the free lunch program, a proxy for family income.

Reading Assessment. The *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory* (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013) is an individually administered reading inventory with multiple measures used to assess reading. For this evaluation, the research team used Form A for the pretest and Form C for the post-test. These are equivalent measures used to assess students' oral reading. Forms A and C include a the San Diego Quick Assessment (SDQA) Graded Word List (GWL), Graded Reading Passages, and Oral Reading Comprehension Questions that accompany each passage. The SDQA has lists of 10 words each. The single set of ESRI word lists were used for the pre- and posttest administration. The ESRI instructs assessors to start all students on the pre-primer (PP) lists of words and to have the student continue reading until he or she makes three or more errors on any one list. Once a student makes three errors on the SDQA, the administration of the GWL test is stopped. The lowest word list with three or more errors (where the administration was stopped) is the Frustration level. The Instructional level is the list with two errors, and the high level (list) with one error or less is scored Independent.

The Graded Reading Passages on the ESRI consist of short, leveled passages of text that are read aloud by the Scholar while the assessor documents reading accuracy by noting miscues. The passages on the ERSI go through the 9th grade level, one grade level beyond the BRI.

Miscues include words skipped, words inserted, and words said incorrectly. The ESRI has assessors say any unknown words that a student cannot read after a five second pause. Scores are reported at the Independent, Instructional, and Frustration levels based on scales provided for each passage. Passages are a mix of expository and narrative forms with accompanying comprehension questions about the text. Scores for each passage are computed using a matrix that includes a dimension for the number of comprehension questions missed and number of word recognition errors. More weight is given to comprehension errors than word errors.

Outcome variables. Scores are reported at the Independent, Instructional, and Frustration levels (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013). The ESRI computes the Independent and Frustration levels using the same percentages as the BRI (Table 2). Scores on the ESRI are computed for each outcome range from pre-primer to ninth grade. The Independent and Frustration scores were used to address the evaluation objectives.

Table 2. Levels of Reading Assessed with the *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory*

Level	Characteristics
Independent (easy)	Comprehension (90%+) Word Recognition (99%+)
Frustration (too hard)	Comprehension (50%+) Word Recognition (90%+)

Analyses Plan

As noted previously, scores for each of the outcomes (Independent and Frustration) range from pre-primer to ninth grade. For analysis purposes, Scholars who performed at pre-primer or primer were assigned a score of zero. Of the 130 scholars assessed, 9 received a zero on the Independent pretest (5 Level I and4 Level II). Twenty-three Scholars received a zero on the Frustration pretest (21 Level I and 1 Level III; one Scholar was missing information about their Level, which we could not calculate because they were also missing information about their grade). At posttest, 6 Scholars' Independent scores were recoded at zero (4 Level I and 2 Level III) and 20 Scholars' Frustration scores were recoded at zero. All were Level I Scholars. Scholars who reached a ceiling score of ninth grade at the Independent, Instructional, or Frustration level at pre- and posttest were assigned a score of 10 to capture their upper limit. While those Scholars might have been able to read beyond 10th grade level, assigning a 10 allows us to capture the minimum of their upper limit. Six Scholars (3 Level II and 3 Level III) reached the upper limit in the Frustration pretest; none reached the max score in the Independent pretest. Nineteen Scholars were able to reach the max on the Frustration posttest (1 Level 1, 9 level II,

and 9 Level III); four Scholars received the max recode score on the Frustration posttest. Of the 130 Scholars assessed, 95 had the complete data and the results are based on those Scholars.

Scholars' demographic characteristics are reported in percentages for categorical variables and means (standard deviations) for continuous variables. Because the outcome variables were not normally distributed, nonparametric tests were used. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine whether there was a significant change from pretest to posttest for the whole sample and for each Scholar level. Next, difference scores were computed (posttest score minus pretest score) to determine the proportion of Scholars whose scores improved, were maintained, or declined over the course of the program. Associations between continuous demographic characteristics and difference scores were assessed using Spearman correlations. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine associations between categorical demographic variables and the outcome measures. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine significance. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.0.

Results

Demographic characteristics

As shown in Table 3, the sample was predominately African American (63.2%) and male (51.6%). Almost three-quarters of the Scholars participated in the free lunch program at their respective schools (71.6%) and just less than half had prior FSP experience. A small proportion repeated a grade (3.2%). Level II Scholars made up more than half the sample (52.6%).

Table 3. Demographic characteristics (N = 95)

	Percent/Mean(SD)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	63.2
Hispanic/Latino	16.8
Mixed/Multi-racial	9.5
White/Caucasian	6.3
Asian	2.1
Other/Unknown	2.1
Gender	
Male	51.6
Female	48.4
Level	
I (Kinder – 2nd grade)	22.1
II (3rd – 5th grade)	52.6
III (6th – 8th grade)	25.3
Free lunch program participation	71.6
Prior grade retention	3.2
Previous FSP experience	55.8
Years FSP experience	2.41 (1.55)
Grades completed	4.05 (2.09)

Independent Reading Performance

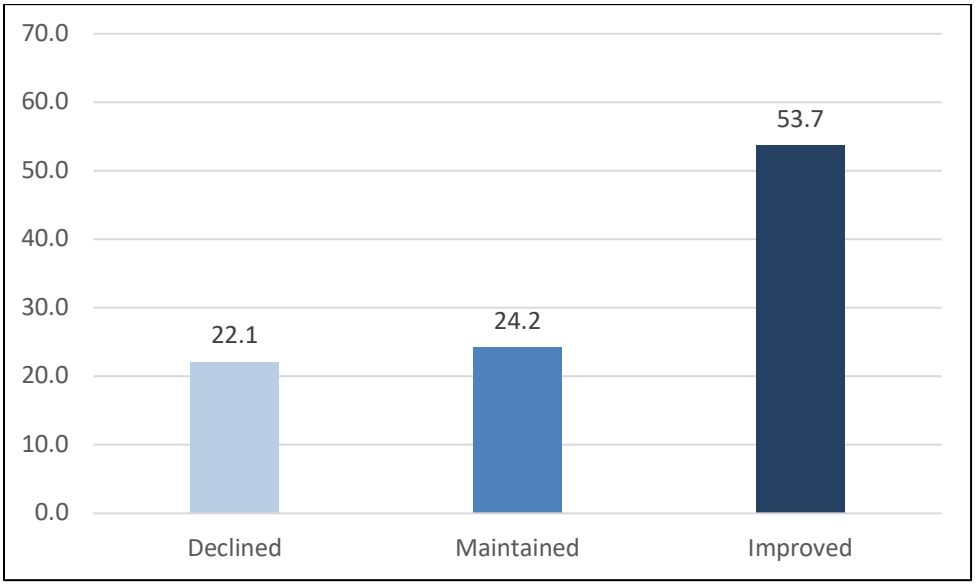
As shown in Table 4, the mean for the entire sample of the Independent score fell just below the third-grade level. Scores improved across the sample by just over a full grade, a mean difference of 1.04, which was statistically significant based on the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test (Z = -5.15 , p < .001). At the Scholar Level, results indicated that the mean pretest score among Level I participants improved by less than half a grade by the posttest (.48), a difference that was not statistically significant (Z = -1.60, p = .109). Level II Scholars showed a mean improvement of 1.00 or an entire grade, which was statistically significant (Z = -3.19, p < .001). Level III Scholars showed the most improvement, with a mean difference of 1.58 from pre- to posttest, which was also significant (Z = -2.29, p = .022).

Table 4. Mean (Standard Deviations) Independent scores by Scholar Level and Total sample (N = 95)

	N	Pretest *M (SD)*	Posttest *M (SD)*
Level			
I	21	1.76 (1.34)	2.24 (1.76)
II	50	2.98 (1.85)	3.98 (2.30)
III	24	3.71 (1.90)	5.29 (2.84)
Total	95	2.89 (1.87)	3.93 (2.55)

Figure 3 shows the proportion of Scholars who improved over time, were able to maintain their performance, or declined over the course of the program. Results indicated that more than half of Scholars improved on the Independent test (53.7%). Another 24.2% maintained their performance on the Independent test over time. However, 22.1% declined over time. Additional analysis revealed that among the 21 Scholars who declined, Level II Scholars made up the highest proportion at 57.% compared to Level I (1%) and Level III Scholars (28.5%).

Figure 3. Distribution of Independent Reading Performance Over Time (N = 95)



Results from the Spearman correlations did not reveal any significant associations between demographic characteristics and difference scores.

Frustration Reading Performance

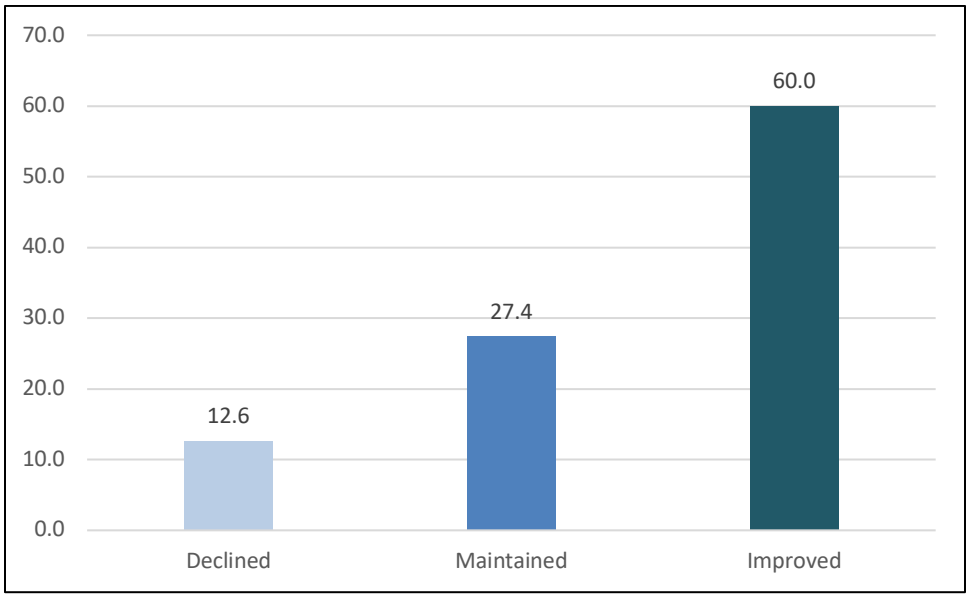
Mean scores at the Scholar Level are reported in Table 5, which shows that the entire sample had a mean improvement of just more than a full grade (1.11). This difference was statistically significant (Z = -5.15, p < .001). Scholars at Level I had nearly a full grade improvement or a mean improvement of .94 points, which was significant (Z = -2.67, p = .008). Level II Scholars had more than a full grade improvement (1.14), a difference that was statistically significant (Z = -3.92, p <.001). Similarly, Scholars at Level III improved by more than a full grade (1.17 mean difference). This change was also significant Z = -2.26, p = .024).

Table 5. Mean (Standard Deviations) Frustration scores by Scholar Level and Total (N = 95)

	N	Pretest *M (SD)*	Posttest *M (SD)*
Level			
I	21	4.10 (1.58)	5.05 (2.20)
II	50	5.78 (2.04)	6.92 (2.42)
III	24	6.83 (2.10)	8.00 (2.69)
Total	95	5.67 (2.17)	6.78 (2.63)

With regard to performance over time, Figure 4 shows that 60% of the Scholars improved over time. More than a quarter were able to maintain their pretest performance (27.44%) but 12.6% declined over time. Of the 12 Scholars whose performance declined, 16.6% were in Level I. An equal proportion of Scholars were in Levels II and III (41.6%).

Figure 4. Distribution of Frustration Reading Performance Over Time (N = 95)



No significant associations were observed between Scholars' demographic characteristics and difference scores.

Discussion

The following objectives guided this evaluation: 1) assess whether Scholars exhibited changes in reading performance over time and whether those changes were statistically significant; 2) determine the proportion of Scholars who improved, maintained, or declined in performance over time; and 3) ascertain whether there was a significant association between Scholars' demographic characteristics and change scores (posttest minus pretest). Before we discuss the findings, it is critical that we address the challenges and changes the program encountered this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the total number of Freedom School program sites was reduced nearly by half from previous years. Second, the number of Scholars at each site was much smaller to comply with the safety procedures required during the pandemic. Third, FSP competed with nearby summer school programs for participants. Fourth, it is likely that some families did not send their children due to concerns about the pandemic. Therefore, the initial sample size of 189 was not achieved. We speculate that the changes in enrollments with more students going to public summer schools may have skewed the demographics at some Freedom School sites. Still, while we collected and analyzed the data, the findings should be

interpreted with extreme caution because the evaluation lacked power. We note that assessors held debriefing sessions following the pre-assessment and noted that masks and the plexiglass barriers created some challenges in hearing Scholars but said that they did not feel this had a significant impact on data collection.

Based on the Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests, Scholars exhibited a significant change in Independent reading performance ($p < .001$) that translated into an entire grade from pre- to posttest. The results also indicated that the change in Independent reading performance was significant among Level II and III Scholars, each improving by at least an entire grade. Changes in the Frustration reading measure were also statistically significant ($p < .001$). Also, Scholars at each Level exhibited significant changes in performance. Level I Scholars had a mean improvement score of .94. Scholars in Levels II and III had significant mean changes in Frustration reading performance of more than an entire grade. It is important to note that while there was improvement at nearly all the Levels in both measures, 31 of the 130 Scholars assessed were not able to reach the minimum reading level on the Independent reading test necessary to receive a score. Of the 31 without a score, 25 did not improve enough to earn a score on the Independent posttest. This was not unique to 2021 but an issue in evaluation from previous years; however, with a smaller overall N of Scholars, these numbers represent a larger percentage of the number of Scholars who completed both the pre- and posttest. Consequently, we were not able to include the Scholars without pre-and posttest results in the analysis. Posthoc analyses revealed that Level I Scholars were significantly more likely to lack Independent test scores ($p < .001$). Indeed, during debriefing sessions, some assessors said it seemed that there were greater numbers of emergent, struggling readers at some sites. The posthoc analysis also indicated a significant association between prior FSP experience and not having Independent test scores, with those with no prior experience more likely not to have Independent test scores ($p < .001$). We note that all the Scholars achieved at least the lowest level of performance on the Frustration reading measure. We point out that while 25 Scholars did not achieve the basal Independent reading level, the proportion (19%) is smaller than the 2019 sample, where 24% did not achieve the minimal reading score.

As for Scholars' ability to improve or maintain their reading performance over time, at least half the Scholars improved on Independent and Frustration reading tests (53.7% and 60%, respectively). Another 24.2% maintained their performance on the Independent measure, and 27.4% did so on the Frustration reading test. However, 22.1% declined on the Independent measure, which captures the child's ability to read independently. This proportion is a sharp contrast to the 13.4% who declined in 2019. Nevertheless, only 12.6% declined on the Frustration test, slightly lower than the proportion in 2019 (14.4%). The effects of the pandemic (i.e., virtual at-home instruction) are likely a factor in the number of Scholars who performed poorly on the Independent measure, particularly among younger students. The emergent

research suggests that children struggling before the pandemic likely experienced the most damaging effects of the changes due to the pandemic (Domingue et al., 2021). To ensure the long-term success of the youngest and possibly most vulnerable emergent readers, we recommend that the program consider efforts to focus on this need. No associations between Scholars' demographic characteristics and difference scores were observed. We speculate that the small sample size lacked the power to detect those associations.

THE CENTER FOR ADOLESCENT LITERACIES AT UNC CHARLOTTE

The Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte is focused on developing instruction to make literacy and learning relevant and effective for adolescents and those who work with them. The Center also conducts research and service in support of its primary mission.

The mission of the Center for Adolescent Literacies (CAL) at UNC Charlotte is to advance the literacy achievement of adolescents in urban school settings and to develop pedagogies for adolescents and those who work with them to prepare them to be productive and empowered 21st century citizens. Specifically, the objectives of our center are:

- To provide community outreach
- To build cultural understanding and awareness
- To promote community engagements
- To encourage civic engagement through service learning
- To equip teachers, parents, and pre-service teachers with knowledge, skills, and dispositions for supporting and scaffolding adolescent literacy and service learning
- To develop and provide collaborative professional development to promote adolescent literacy
- To encourage collaborative involvement among all stakeholders (including teachers, students, parents/guardians, and university faculty).

Evaluation Leadership Team

Dr. Bruce Taylor is the Director of the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte and is a Professor in the Department of Reading & Elementary Education. For more than 17 years, Dr. Taylor has provided leadership in developing the ReadWriteServe (RWS) community-based literacy initiatives at UNC Charlotte. His research examines reading in classroom, community and out-of-school contexts. He has led several reading program evaluation projects. Dr. Taylor teaches undergraduate, master's level, and doctoral courses that focus on content-area and adolescent literacy, digital literacies in education, and sociocultural aspects of language and literacy.

Dr. Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health. Dr. Lara-Cinisomo is a Developmental Psychologist by training with expertise in child development. Her prior research focused on school readiness among low-income and racially/ethnically diverse children. In addition to her work on the current project, Dr. Lara-Cinisomo's research focuses on mental health disparities in women and mothers, particularly immigrant and veteran-related populations. Her research includes qualitative and quantitative methods.

References

Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Olson, L. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review, 72* (2), 167 – 180.

Alexander, K., Pitcock, S., & Boulay, M.C. (2016). *The summer slide: What we know and can do about summer learning loss*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (2003). The impact of summer set-back on the reading achievement. *Phi Delta Kappan, 85*(1), 68-75.

Applegate, M. D., Quinn, K. B., & Applegate, A. J. (2002). Levels of thinking required by comprehension questions in informal reading inventories. *The Reading Teacher, (56)*2, 174-180.

Ares, N., Smith, J., & Wu, X. (2021). Community-based standards and community cultural wealth in Freedom Schools. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, *29*(1), 1–20.

Aronson, J., Zimmerman, J. & Carols, L. (1998). Improving student achievement by extending school: Is it just a matter of time? WestEd. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory.

Beach, K. D., & Traga Philippakos, Z. A. (2021). Effects of a summer reading intervention on the reading performance of elementary grade students from low-income families. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *37*(2), 169–189.

Bethea, S. L. (2012). The impact of Oakland Freedom School's summer youth program on the psychological development of African American youth. *Journal of Black Psychology 28*(4), 442-454.

Bowers, L. M., & Schwarz, I. (2018). Preventing summer learning loss: Results of a summer literacy program for students from sow-SES homes. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *34*(2), 99–116.

Coffey, H. (2010). ""''They' taught ''me'": The benefits of early community-based field experiences in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies, 26* (2), 335-342.

Cooper, H. M. (2003). *Summer learning loss: The problem and some solutions*. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., & Muhlenbruck, L. (2000). Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 65*(1), 1-118. EJ 630 022.

Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, *66*(3), 227-268. EJ 596 384.

Davis, F. B. (1944). Fundamental factors of comprehension in reading. *Psychometrika, 9,* 185-197.

Davis, F. B. (1968). Research in comprehension in reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 3,* 499-545.

Davis, J. H. (2010). Guide our feet: Teacher education and servant-leadership in a Children's Defense Fund Freedom School (Doctoral Dissertation). *ProQuest LLC*.

Dechenes, S., & Malone, H. J., (2011). Year-round learning: Linking school, afterschool, and summer learning to support student success. *Harvard Family Research Project* (ED521123).

Dessoff, A. (2011). Is year-round schooling on track? *District Administration, 47*(7), 34-36.

Dills, A., Hernández-Julián, R., & Rotthoff, K. W. (2016). Knowledge decay between semesters. *Economics of Education Review*, 5063-74.

Domingue, B. W., Hough, H. J., Lang, D., & Yeatman, J. (2021). Changing Patterns of Growth in Oral Reading Fluency during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Working Paper. *Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE*.

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE). (2020). Quality Counts 2020: Grading the states. Education Week. Volume 40, Number 3. *Education Week*.

Educational Testing Service. (2012). ETS research spotlight 7: Innovation in reading assessment. ETS: Princeton, New Jersey.

Gershenson, S., & Hayes, M. S. (2017). The summer learning of exceptional students. *American Journal of Education*, *123*(3), 447-473.

Graham, A., McNamara, J. K., & Van Lankveld, J. (2011). Closing the summer learning gap for vulnerable learners: an exploratory study of a summer literacy programme for kindergarten children at-risk for reading difficulties. *Early Child Development and Care, 181*95), 575-585.

Ha, C., Durtschi, S., Roehrig, A., Turner, J., Craig, M., Mesa, M. P., & Funari, C. (2021). Promoting children's reading motivation with culturally relevant reading education. *Grantee Submission*, *59*(1), 268–282.

Hayes, D. P., & Grether, J. (1983). The school year and vacations: When do students learn? *Cornell Journal of Social Relations, 17*(1), 56-71.

Howard, T. C. (2015). Why Black Lives (and minds) matter: Race, Freedom Schools & the quest for educational equity. *Journal of Negro Education, 85*(2), 101-113.

Hughes-Hassell, S., & Rodge, P. (2007). The leisure reading habits of urban adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 51*(1), 22-33.

Jackson, T. O. (2011). Developing sociopolitical consciousness at Freedom Schools: Implications for culturally responsive teacher preparation. *Teaching Education, 22* (3), 277-290.

Jackson, T. O. (2009a). Toward collective work and responsibility: Sources of support within a Freedom School teacher community. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*, 1141-1149.

Jackson, T. O. (2009b). Making the readings come to life": Expanding notions of language arts at Freedom School. *The New Educator, 5*(3), 311-328.

Jimerson, S.R., Woehr, S.M., Kaufman, A.M. & Anderson, G.E. (2003). Grade retention and promotion: Information and strategies for educators. National Association of School Psychologists, S3-61 – S3-64.

Johns, J. L. (2010). *Basic Reading Inventory: Pre-Primer through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments, 10th Ed*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

Kazouh, A., Hollowell, A., Fox, L., Bentley-Edwards, K., & Public School Forum of North Carolina. (2020). Pre-K through 12 education and COVID-19: Landscape analysis of impact indicators. In *Public School Forum of North Carolina*. Public School Forum of North Carolina.

Kim, J. (2004). Summer reading & the ethnic achievement gap. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 9*(2), 169-188.

Kim, J. S., & Quinn, D. M. (2013). The effects of summer reading on low-income children's literacy achievement from Kindergarten to grade 8: A meta-analysis of classroom and home interventions. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3), 386-431.

Kuhfield, M., Tarasawa, B., & NWEA. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. Brief. In *NWEA*. NWEA.

Lara-Cinisomo, S., Taylor, D. B., & Medina, A. (2019). Summer reading program can help most at-risk children: Results from the Freedom School program. *Reading & Writing Quarterly: https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2019.1627968*

Leefatt, S. (2015). The key to equality: Why we must prioritize summer learning to narrow the socioeconomic achievement gap*. Brigham Young University Education & Law Journal, (2)*, 549-584.

Leslie, L. & Caldwell, J. (2009). Formal and informal measures of reading comprehension. In S. E. Israel & G. G. Duffy, (Eds.), *Handbook of research on reading comprehension*. New York: Routledge, pp. 403-427.

Leslie, L. & Caldwell, J. (2016). *Qualitative reading inventory-6, 6th Ed.* New York: Pearson.

McKay-Jackson, C. (2014). A critical approach to social emotional learning instruction through community-based service learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *12*(3), 292–312.

McDaniel, S. C., McLeod, R., Carter, C. L., & Robinson, C. (2017). Supplemental summer literacy instruction: Implications for summer reading loss. *Reading Psychology, 38*(7), 673-686.

McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C., Schwartz, H., Bodilly, S., McInnis, B., Lichter, D., & Cross, A. B. (2012). Making summer count: How summer programs can boost children's learning. *Education Digest, 77*(6), 47-52.

Menard, J., & Wilson, A. M. (2014). Summer Learning Loss among Elementary School Children with Reading Disabilities. *Exceptionality Education International*, *23*(1), 72–85.

Mesa, M. P., Roehrig, A., Funari, C., Durtschi, S., Ha, C., Rawls, E., & Davis, C. (2021). Young African American scholars make reading gains at literacy-focused, culturally relevant summer camp that combats summer reading loss. *Grantee Submission*, *59*(1), 252–267.

Mitchell, C., & Begeny, J. C. (2014). Improving Student Reading Through Parents' Implementation of a Structured Reading Program. *School Psychology Review, 43*(1), 41-58.

National Assessment of Education Progress. (2017). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

Nilsson, N. L. (2008). A critical analysis of eight informal reading inventories. *The Reading Teacher, 61*(1), 526-536.

Nikirk, M. (2012). Stave off summer learning loss with do-at-home activities. *Tech Directions, 71*(10), 16-17.

Renaissance Learning, Inc. (2010). *Getting the most out of STAR ReadingTM: Using data to inform instruction and intervention.* Wisconsin Rapids, WI: Renaissance Learning.

Sabatini, J. P., O'Reilly, T. & Albro, E. R. (2012a). *Measuring up: Advances in how we assess reading ability* (Volume I). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Sabatini, J. P., O'Reilly, T. & Albro, E. R. (2012b). *Reaching an understanding: Innovations in how we view reading assessment* (Volume II). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Schacter, J. (2003). Preventing summer reading declines in children who are disadvantaged. *Journal of Early Intervention, 26(*1), 47-58.

Shanker, J. L., & Cockrum, W. (2013). *Ekwall/Shanker reading inventory, 6th Ed.* New York: Pearson.

Shimshon-Santo, A. (2018). "Do our lives matter?" Music, poetry, and Freedom School. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, *13*(3), 256–267.

Silva, E. (2007). On the clock: Rethinking the way schools use time. Washington, D.C.: Education Sector.

Smith, K. (2010). Fostering regimes of truth: Understanding and reflecting on the Freedom School way. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 19*(2), 191-209.

Smith, L. (2011-2012). Slowing the summer slide. *Educational Leadership, 69*(4), 60-63.

Spector, J. E. (2005). How reliable are informal reading inventories? *Psychology in the Schools, 42*(6), 593-603.

Stanford, M. D. (2017). Transfer of instructional practices from Freedom Schools to the classroom. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, *49*(1), 26–46.

Von Drehle, D. (2010, July 22). The case against summer. *Time Magazine*. Available at http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2005654,00.html .

Watson, M. (2014). Freedom Schools then and now: A transformative approach to learning. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 14*(1), 170-190.

WestEd (2001). *Making time count*. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory.

Williamson, L. A. (2013). No school like Freedom School. *Teaching Tolerance 52*(43, 25-28.

Woelfel, K. (2005). Learning takes time for at-risk learners. *Principal*, 85 (Nov./Dec.), 18 -21.

Appendix A: Review of Research

Note: This review of related research is updated with each evaluation cycle. We review the research literature and add to this section but retain much of what has been reviewed in earlier reports.

Freedom Schools programs are six-week, literacy-based summer learning programs designed for children at risk of school failure. The risk factors that children in poverty face include lower academic achievement as measured by grades and on standardized tests, lower graduation rates, and difficulties with reading and literacy. Literacy is a key aspect of school completion. Results from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that 31% of fourth-grade and 26% of eighth-grade public school students in North Carolina scored below the Basic level in reading. Only 39% of fourth-grade and 33% of eighth-grade students scored at or above the Proficient level. Given that NAEP scores for North Carolina have changed little over the past decade, they continue to raise concerns about the reading ability of school-age children in North Carolina.

Youth from low-income households tend to have lower reading achievement scores than children from middle- and high-income households. Each school year, the reading achievement gap grows and much of the distance accrues during the summer when children are not as inclined to read. A study by Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) examined the leisure reading habits of 584 urban adolescents (grades 5 – 8). One of their findings indicated that summer reading was not a "popular" activity for either male or female urban youth. However, it is known that for at-risk children, summer reading is essential to bridge the reading achievement gap (Allington & McGill-Frazen, 2003; Kim, 2004). Schacter (2003) studied the summer reading achievement of 61 first graders in Los Angeles. His study found that an 8-week summer reading "camp" experience had bearing on vocabulary, comprehension, phonics, and oral reading. Thus, for at-risk urban children, a summer program that focuses on reading has the potential to positively influence reading achievement. More recently, a study of 31 six and seven-year-old children enrolled in a summer program with a structured reading program showed benefits in stemming summer learning loss (McDaniel, McLeod, Carter & Robinson, 2017).

Research on the CDF Freedom Schools programs has focused on the historical context of the program (Watson, 2014), ideological contexts (Smith, 2010), leadership aspects of the Freedom School program, the impact on college-age Servant Leader Interns (Jackson, 2009a) and implications for teacher education (Coffey, 2009; Davis, 2010; Jackson, 2009b; Jackson, 2011). A study by Ares, et al. (2021) explored relationships between staffs' standards and the identified forms of cultural capital and the importance of such efforts for oppressed communities' claims to educational sovereignty. Stanford (2017) documented the instructional practices of three current classroom teachers who formerly served as Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) in Freedom

Schools noting that transfer of Freedom School practices to public school classrooms was low. An overview of the Freedom School program was published in Teaching Tolerance (Williamson, 2013). Bethea (2012) published results of a study that indicate that involvement in the Freedom School program in Oakland, California had a positive influence on Scholars' racial identity and views toward African/African American culture. Pre- and posttest results also showed an increase in social skills strategies and a future commitment to social action; however, the study showed no statistically significant increase in attitudes toward reading. McKay-Jackson (2014) conducted an analysis to examine critical social emotional learning and social political development of youth in a Chicago Freedom School program.

Howard (2015) examines Freedom Schools as a model for reimagining education for Black children that re-centers learning, literacy, and culture in an atmosphere that is free from a police presence in schools. Shimson-Santo (2018) work explores how collaboration among Freedom School Scholars and staff with pre-service teachers and community members through art education helped increase political consciousness as well as build leadership skills. In 2019, Lara-Cinisomo, Taylor and Medina published an analysis of Freedom School data from summers 2010 through 2013. Findings from this study suggest that the Freedom School program sites included in the study helped children improve their reading as measured using the BRI over time, with improvement most notable in children in higher grade levels and those most vulnerable (i.e., grade repetition) also showing growth. Mixed-methods research by Ha et al. (2021) offers promising results on how Freedom School can empower young Black students through social action and opportunities for reading engagement, thus supporting their reading motivation while research from this team led by Mesa et al. (2021) suggests gains in reading comprehension, vocabulary and fluency for 3rd through 5th grade students in Freedom School.

Summer Learning Loss

The 9-month school schedule currently in widespread use has its roots in 19th and 20th Century society in which 85% of Americans were involved in agriculture. It made sense at the time to standardize school schedules and to have children at home during the summer months to help with farming. Today fewer than 3% of Americans are involved in agriculture and research shows that students' learning is impacted negatively by this block of time away from school.

There is a growing body of research about summer learning loss including the publication in the last year of a comprehensive book on the subject, *The Summer Slide: What We Know and Can Do about Summer Learning Loss* (Alexander, Pitcock, & Boulay, 2016). A review of research (meta-analysis) by Kim and Quinn (2013) on summer reading interventions conducted in the United States and Canada from 1998 to 2011 showed that summer reading interventions that employed teacher-directed literacy lessons had a positive effect on K-8 participants' reading

comprehension. The effect of these summer interventions was stronger for children from low-income backgrounds than from mixed-income backgrounds. A study by Gershenson and Hayes (2017) on the summer activities of exceptional students, which they define as English language learners and students with an individualized educational plan (IEP), shows that these students are less likely to participate in organized summer programs but show greater gains in reading than other groups of students. Bowers and Schwarz (2018) documented gains for low-SES children participating in a summer literacy program at a local community center. Beach and Traga Philippakos (2021) suggests that a summer reading program using evidence-based practices mitigates learning loss on tests of phonemic awareness, decoding, word reading fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, or writing for intervention participants. Meta-analyses conducted by Cooper et al. (2000 and 1996) integrating studies examining the effects of summer vacation on standardized achievement test scores showed that summer learning loss equaled at least one month of instruction as measured by grade level equivalents on standardized test scores. An analysis of the research of Hayes and Grether (1983) with high- and low-poverty students in 600 New York City schools showed that rich and poor students had a seven-month difference in scores at the beginning of second grade, but this widened to a difference of two years and seven months by the end of grade six. What made this particularly striking was the research showing little or no difference in these students' achievement when school was in session: they learned at the same pace. As Hayes and Grether noted: “The differential progress made during the four summers between 2nd and 6th grade accounts for upwards of 80 percent of the achievement difference between economically advantaged ... and ... ghetto schools.”

Research from the past decade shows that the impact of summer learning loss may be greater than found in earlier studies (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). This deficit is so pronounced that Allington and McGill-Franzen dub summer reading loss as the “smoking gun.” Their research has reported that the cumulative effects of summer reading loss can mean that struggling readers entering middle school may lag two years behind peers in their ability to read. Additional research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007) traces the achievement gap between high–socioeconomic and low–socioeconomic 9th grade students to the loss in reading proficiency that occurs over the summer months throughout the elementary grades. Summer learning loss across the elementary school years accounted for more than half the difference in the achievement gap between students from high–socioeconomic and low–socioeconomic families. A study by Kim (2004) published by The Center for Evaluation of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences highlights that low-income and minority students experience greater summer reading loss but suggest that summer reading mitigates this negative impact. A 2014 study by Menard and Wilson suggests that the effect on students with reading disabilities (RD) is greater than on non-RD students while another study (Sandburg Patton & Reschly, 2013) suggests greater impact on younger students.

The issue of summer learning loss is not only debated in scholarly journals. In 2010, *Time Magazine* published a cover story entitled "The Case against Summer" (Von Drehle, 2010) in which it reported:

> The problem of summer vacation, first documented in 1906, compounds year after year. What starts as a hiccup in a 6-year-old's education can be a crisis by the time that child reaches high school. After collecting a century's worth of academic studies, summer-learning expert Harris Cooper, … concluded that, on average, all students lose about a month of progress in math skills each summer, while low-income students slip as many as three months in reading comprehension, compared with middle-income students.

Calls to reorganize school calendars and extend the school year have been suggested as a way to deal with the issue of summer learning loss (Aronson, Zimmerman & Carols, 1998; Dechenes & Malone, 2011; Dessoff, 2011; Jimerson, Woehr, Kaufman & Anderson, 2003; Silva, 2007; WestEd, 2001; Woelfel, 2005). Additional research focuses on policy and funding towards mitigating summer learning loss as a way to address gaps in academic achievement (Leefatt, 2015) while other research suggests parent tutoring during the summer as a means for helping many struggling readers (Mitchell & Begeny, 2014). More recent research indicates that summer programs with a math and literacy component can help students realize gains in their math and reading abilities during the summer months (Graham, McNamara & Van Lankveld, 2011; Smith, 2011-2012). Recent scholarship has included more on the role of summer programs to mitigate summer learning loss (McCombs, et al., 2012) and even "do-at-home" activities (Nikirk, 2012). Research on summer learning loss has recently extended to the post-secondary level with research on summer and between-semester knowledge decay (Dills, Hernandez-Julian, & Rotthoff, 2016).

COVID-19 Learning Loss

There is an emerging body of research related to learning loss due to changes in instruction and schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Quality Counts 2020 report published by *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, 2020) details impact on academic achievement and increases in educational equality. Scholarship suggests that the COVID-19 learning loss resembles summer learning loss and that lessons learned from research on summer learning loss may help educators address academic declines due to COVID-19 (Kuhfield, Tarasawa, & NWEA, 2020). We are just beginning to understand the impact of COVID-19 on student learning, and scholars in North Carolina and elsewhere are calling for new research and sources of data to understand and address COVID-19 learning loss (Kazouh, et al., 2020).