Since 2017, the Children’s Defense Fund has directly operated year-round CDF Freedom Schools® programs in Washington, DC. Our direct experience brings the summer CDF Freedom Schools core concepts into year-round out-of-school time programming.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 public crisis challenged the on-the-ground operation of the D.C. CDF Freedom Schools program. Despite those challenges, CDF Freedom Schools staff engaged parents and families to determine their most immediate needs. Those needs informed our ability to strategically pivot from in-person programming to a distance learning program serving children from four school communities in Wards 7 and 8.

Thanks to the input of parents and families, and generous funding support from individuals, foundations, nonprofit and corporate partners, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and the DC Office of Out of School Time, we designed a virtual enrichment program where we:

- Provided virtual access to high quality academic enrichment through a research-based, multicultural, social justice and conflict resolution-focused curriculum (Integrated Reading Curriculum).
- Trained 14 college-aged young people and 2 DC Public School teachers in an intergenerational model of leadership and employed them to serve as Servant Leader Interns (SLIs).
- Engaged parents and families through weekly parent meetings and frequent family check-ins.
- Conducted virtual field trips and engaged children with enrichment activities that helped build character and support social-emotional development.
- Provided brand-new laptops to 25 children thanks to the support of Freddie Mac, ensuring equal access to the technology resources they needed to participate in virtual summer learning.
- Set up neighborhood “Freedom Zones” giving opportunities for children and families to pick up culturally-relevant books and craft supplies.
• Hosted Freedom parades that gifted families with fresh fruits and vegetables, laundry supplies, and parent boxes filled with goodies, social and emotional learning (SEL) activities, and a $25.00 grocery gift card.

• Distributed clothing and essential supplies to 20 families thanks to a generous in-kind contribution from H&M.

• Encouraged civic engagement through lessons about social action and participation in civic events.

• Shared resources for accessing food, mental health care, and other basic needs.

• Cemented our presence in Wards 7 and 8 through 2023 thanks to a second 21st Century Community Learning Center grant awarded by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

In 2021 and beyond, our goal is to expand our reach in the region to serve more children and families. As we enhance our services with place-based movement building strategies, we will further empower children to believe in their ability and responsibility to make a difference while instilling in them a love of reading. Thank you to those of you who continue to make this work possible.