

2021

21st CCLC Evaluation Report



DC Freedom Schools 2021 Summer Strong Programs

Suzanne Raber

Raber Education Research Consulting

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Executive Summary

The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center program to provide after-school and summer activities for children living in the poorest neighborhoods of Washington, DC. This evaluation report covers the first year of a 3-year grant and describes the implementation and outcomes of the *CDF Freedom Schools’* program for children attending five program sites in Summer 2021: Boone, Nalle, and Plummer Elementary Schools; Excel Academy for Girls; and Kelly Miller Middle School. Summer programming was supplemented with additional funding from the Washington DC mayor’s office, and there referred to as the Summer Strong program.

DC Freedom Schools faced considerable challenges implementing its extended time learning programs with the COVID-19 public health crisis which closed all DC Public Schools and schools nationally in March 2020. As the public schools struggled to deliver their instructional program through distance learning, *DC Freedom Schools* (and other after-school programs)¹ strived to meet families and children’s most immediate needs first and then to develop a distance enrichment program that could be delivered online to those scholars and families they were able to reach.



The impact of COVID-19 continued into the 2020-21 school year with most DCPS students receiving the bulk of their instruction through virtual programs. With school sites offering limited in-person instruction and public health guidelines restricting in-person community activities, CDF was challenged to transition back to in-person programs in Summer 2021. Working closely with five school communities serving children in Wards 7 and 8, CDF was able to develop and structure their *Freedom Schools* program to meet the needs of each community and the building access offered by the host school sites. This collaboration resulted in two sites offering 6 weeks of full-day in-person instruction and three sites offering 3 weeks of instruction, supplemented where possible with virtual programming or phone check-ins with scholars for 2 additional weeks. While registering 148 children from the five school communities for possible participation, 117 children actually participated in any program activities and ultimately 91 children were regular participants in the summer program. Data collection included staff interviews; child, parent and staff surveys; and a reading assessment for a sample of scholars at the Boone and Excel sites. These data allowed us to pinpoint program successes and challenges. The data also suggest that the program had a positive impact (regarding instructional reading levels, character traits, and social-emotional skills) on the children who participated and on the Servant Leader Interns who staffed the program.

The experiences of the 2021 *DC Freedom Schools* summer program also suggest recommendations for future programming, especially as CDF will continue serving two of these same school communities with after-school programs in the 2021-22 school year. These recommendations fall in the areas of staff training, parent engagement, and coordination with school sites.

¹ See Corey, Mitchell, *COVID-19 Has Left Thousands of After-School Programs in Jeopardy*, in [Education Week](#), July 27, 2020.

Introduction

Communities continue to explore the best ways to support children during the summer to enhance the impact of school year classroom education. The U.S. Department of Education funds 21st Century Community Learning Center programs to provide students who are at risk of academic failure with opportunities for academic and personal enrichment. These 21st CCLC programs offer safe environments for students during extended learning time, primarily after school and in the summer.



The Children's Defense Fund has provided summer and after-school programs since 1995 and currently supports *Freedom Schools* programs in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Through their program model, they strive to empower youth to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves and their families, and through social action, to make a difference in their communities and beyond. The program endeavors to enhance children's motivation to read and their attitudes about learning by exposing them to a research-based, multicultural curriculum featuring culturally-relevant books. The books are designed to increase racial pride and encourage children to higher achievement, featuring heroes, heroines and settings that reflect the children's own culture and history. At the same time the program connects families to the appropriate resources in their communities and promotes engagement in their child's education. The program focuses on enriching the whole child, by providing children and families access to the following services:

- High quality academic enrichment through a research-based, multicultural, social justice and conflict resolution curriculum (Integrated Reading Curriculum);
- Parent and family development through parent meetings, frequent family check-ins, and engagement opportunities;
- Civic engagement through lessons about social action and participation in civic events; and
- Nutrition and physical and mental health by sharing resources for accessing food, mental health care and other basic needs.

In addition to the program's focus on the literacy and civic engagement skills of its student participants, the program strives to develop the civic consciousness of its staff, most of whom are college students preparing for teaching or other social service professions.

In September 2020 the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) received a three-year grant to fund *Freedom Schools* after-school and summer programs serving children in the poorest communities of Washington, DC. This evaluation report covers the implementation and outcomes of the 2021 *DC Freedom Schools'* summer program, serving children and families from five school communities in Wards 7 and 8: Lawrence Boone, Nalle, and Plummer Elementary Schools, as well as Kelly Miller Middle School and the Excel Academy for Girls. CDF received additional funding from the Washington DC Office of the Mayor to help support their summer program, also known as Summer Strong. It is important to note that due to the COVID-19 public health crisis, many DC Public School students have received primarily virtual instruction since March 2020. For many children, the *DC Freedom Schools* Summer 2021 program was their first time back to in-person instruction in more than a year.

Evaluation Framework and Design

National studies have demonstrated that 21st CCLC programs can be effective in providing after school and summer program supports to low-income families and their children and can improve academic outcomes for participants (e.g., Afterschool Alliance, 2015; American Institutes for Research, 2015; Mathematica Policy Research, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education has identified nine characteristics present in high-quality expanded learning programs²:

1. Goal setting, strong management and sustainability
2. Quality staffing
3. Attention to safety, health and nutrition issues;
4. Effective partnerships with CBOs, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement and youth groups
5. Strong involvement of families
6. Enriching learning opportunities
7. Linkages between summer and public school personnel
8. Monthly program activities and timeline
9. Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness.

CDF has incorporated these characteristics in its DC Freedom School program model, as illustrated in Table 1 on the following page.

The 21st CCLC grant program requires a traditional implementation and outcome evaluation that examines program goals, services provided, and the impact of these services on the youth participants, their families and the staff interns. While the *CDF Freedom Schools* model incorporates all nine characteristics present in high quality expanded learning programs, this evaluation will focus on implementation and outcomes with respect to five of these characteristics:

- Quality staffing;
- Strong involvement of families;
- Enriching learning opportunities;
- Linkages between school year and summer personnel; and
- Monthly program activities and timeline.

In addition, the 21st CCLC grant application (OSSE, 2020) requires that grantees include in their evaluation and monitoring plan measurable objectives and targets. CDF developed three measurable objectives and targets relevant to their summer programs:

- **Measurable Objective #2:** *50% of regular attendees will show improvement in their reading skills during the 6-week summer program, as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory.*
- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the 6-week summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement) and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.*
- **Measurable Objective #4:** *Programs will offer at least three academically-enriched*

² USED, *Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-School Programs* (April, 2000).

student/family events [across the year] designed to increase parent engagement and knowledge of their student's academic program, as measured by program activity logs and surveys.

These objectives and their respective targets are also reflected the in the evaluation design.

Table 1. Characteristics of High Quality Extended Learning Programs found in CDF's DC Freedom Schools

Characteristics of High-Quality ELPs	Program Features of CDF Freedom Schools Summer Programs
1. Goal setting, strong management and sustainability	CDF has more than 40 years of experience managing public, foundation and corporate grant-funded programs across the U.S. with repeated funding from multiple sources.
2. Quality staffing	Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) are recent college graduates or current college students with interest, training and experience working with children; staff members receive program-specific training (including one-week national training) and maintain 1:10 ratios with students.
3. Attention to safety, health and nutrition issues	Program is conducted on school campuses by staff with thorough background checks, following DCPS COVID protocols; children are served nutritious meals and snacks. The program shares resources with families for addressing food security and mental health needs.
4. Effective partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), Juvenile Justice agencies, law enforcement and youth groups	CDF partners with schools, faith- and community-based organizations, municipalities, colleges and universities to offer their programs at no cost to participants. In Summer 2021, DC Freedom Schools partnered with HBCUs (e.g., Howard University) and CBOs (e.g., Urban Alliance) to provide SLIs; businesses (e.g., Freddie Mac) to provide student backpacks; vendors to provide enrichment activities; and Black Swan Academy to provide parent workshops.
5. Strong family involvement	Program includes virtual activities for parents (e.g., workshops on student advocacy) and whole family events (e.g., closing recognition celebration); parents are surveyed on program priorities and connected to appropriate community resources.
6. Enriching learning opportunities	Program includes the research-based Integrated Reading Curriculum (featuring high-interest, culturally relevant books with strong characters), STEM-themed enrichment activities, and culturally appropriate enrichment activities (e.g., African dance, drumming).
7. Linkages between school year and summer personnel	Program staff members (SLIs and site coordinators) work with summer staff at each school site to coordinate use of shared space, implement COVID protocols, and in the case of Excel Academy, serve additional community students.
8. Monthly program activities and timeline	Program follows a weekly schedule for students with different activities each day of the week and a culminating field trip for scholars, and offers two summer workshops for parents.
9. Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness	The 3-year after-school and summer program includes a proposed program evaluation and monitoring plan; collection of child, parent and staff outcome data; and evaluation reports on program implementation and effectiveness.

Consequently, the evaluation included the following data sources:

- Review of *staff training and curriculum materials*;
- *Basic Reading Inventory* administered to a sample of scholars during Week 1 and again in Week 6 of the summer program;
- *A child survey of character traits* (academic engagement, self-empowerment, civic engagement, conflict resolution) and social and emotional learning skills administered in Week 1 and again in Week 6 of the summer program;
- *Interviews with program staff* (director, family engagement coordinator, site coordinators, and interns) at the end of the summer program;
- *Surveys of parents and program staff* (site coordinators, interns) at the end of the summer program; and
- *Program attendance*.

Program Overview

While the pandemic prevented in-person programs in summer 2020 and in-person after-school programs in school year 2020-21, in-person summer programs were once again allowed to operate at DCPS school sites in summer 2021. CDF worked with five school communities already familiar with *DC Freedom Schools* to develop a program schedule that best matched school site availability and met family needs. These communities had previously hosted after-school or summer Freedom School programs. Boone ES and Plummer ES were Freedom School sites for after-school and summer programs in 2020-21. Nalle ES had been a Freedom School site in 2018-19 and feeds into Kelly Miller MS. Based on the program's popularity with girls, the Excel Academy for Girls agreed to house a full day program. CDF worked with DCPS and each school principal to provide full-day programs where possible and a half-day program in one middle school housing a morning program for children needing summer remediation. The sites varied in program schedules, including the number of program days, the hours per day, and whether the August sessions were virtual (Nalle ES) or consisted of individual phone sessions with each scholar (Miller MS). These schedule variations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Schedules for Program Sites

School Site	Weeks in Session	Total Program Days	Program Hours/Day	Virtual Sessions (last 2 weeks)	Staff Phone Check-ins (last 2 weeks)
Boone ES	Jul 6 – Aug 13	29	6	No	No
Excel ES	Jul 6 – Aug 13	29	6	No	No
Nalle ES	Jul 12 – Aug 12	24	6	Yes	No
Plummer ES	Jul 12 – Jul 30	15	6	No	No
Miller MS	Jul 12 – Aug 13	25	3	No	Yes

While the program schedules varied across the five program sites, all sites maintained the same critical components of the *Freedom Schools* model:

- **Harambee!** Each day started with a live Harambee!³ led by the SLIs to pull the scholars together in a communal gathering that set a motivational, high-energy tone for the day.
- **Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC).** Each morning (or first thing in the afternoon-only program at Miller), SLIs led scholars through the IRC, using multi-cultural, social justice-themed books selected to engage and motivate scholars to read.
- **Enrichment.** The program purposefully provides enrichment activities designed to build character and support social-emotional development. Each afternoon (or after IRC at Miller) SLIs and the program partner vendors led the scholars through hands-on enrichment activities specifically selected to appeal to the age groups served and build on themes encountered in their reading. These included the arts (e.g., music production, West African drumming and dance, Impressionism painting), crafts/trades (e.g., sewing, cooking, cosmetology) and STEM-inspired activities (e.g., making ice cream in a bag).
- **Social justice themes.** The overarching theme for *DC Freedom Schools* is “I can make a difference.” This theme was expanded upon each week so that scholars could examine how they could make a difference in themselves, their family, the community, the country, the world, and more generally through social action. In addition each site explored a social justice theme through a hands-on project (e.g., making maps of what their community should be like).



School Community Profiles

The school communities served by *DC Freedom Schools’ Summer Strong Program* share characteristics of the poorest wards in Washington, DC. These profiles, seen in Table 2, feature students from low income families who are at risk of academic failure.



Program Enrollment and Attendance

Despite the pandemic with most children attending school virtually during the 2020-21 school year, *DC Freedom Schools* was able to recruit families in these five school communities and register children via a website that provided information about the program. Family outreach was led by a Family Engagement

³ *Harambee* is a Kenyan tradition of community self-help events, e.g. education, fundraising or development activities. *Harambee* literally means "all pull together" in Swahili.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of School Sites Participating in Summer Strong

School Site	Demographic Characteristics			
	Economically Disadvantaged	Race/Ethnicity	2019 PARCC-ELA % meeting grade level expectations	2019 PARCC-Math % meeting grade level expectations
Boone ES	100%	95% Black 4% Hispanic	18%	11%
Excel ES	100%	98% Black 1% Hispanic	26%	9%
Nalle ES	100%	90% Black 10% Hispanic	11%	23%
Plummer ES	100%	89% Black 10% Hispanic	23%	18%
Miller MS	100%	95% Black 4% Hispanic	19%	6%

Coordinator and supported by the site coordinators who had already established relationships with their respective school communities. Recruiting efforts were successful and a total of 134 children were either registered online or enrolled at the school site. Many families signed up, however, uncertain of their summer plans. Over the course of the summer 117 different children attended at least one session of the program and 91 children were regular participants, attending at least half of their site’s scheduled program days.⁴ Participation levels are also reflected in the average daily attendance⁵ at each site, which ranged from 62 to 82% across the five program sites. See Table 3.

Table 3. Summer Program Enrollment and Attendance by School Site

School Site (Program Days)	Number of Scholars			Average Daily Attendance
	Registered/Enrolled	Attended Any Sessions	Regular Participant	
Boone ES (29)	30	24	18	69%
Excel ES (29)	70	57	43	62%
Nalle ES 1 (24)	14	8	5	66%
Plummer ES (15)	20	17	14	61%
Miller MS (25)	14	11	11	82%
TOTAL	148	117	91	

Summer Strong programs were available to children in grades K through 8, based on the grade levels served by the school site: Excel Academy serves grades K – 8, Kelly Miller Middle School serves grades 6 – 8 and Boone, Nalle and Plummer elementaries serve students K – 5. The Summer Strong program continued to

⁴ Attendance at one program site was interrupted by a COVID scare with a classroom quarantined for several days after one scholar tested positive.

⁵ Average daily attendance (ADA) is a common indicator of participation levels in education, calculated as $(\text{number of days present}) / (\text{number of days present} + \text{number of days absent})$ across all attendees.

appeal more to girls than boys. Excel Academy for Girls was the largest site and three of the other sites served more girls than boys. Overall 76% of program attendees were girls. All attendees were of Black race/ethnicity and from low income families, consistent with the student populations of the five school sites. See Table 4.

Table 4. Demographic Profile of Program Attendees

School Site (All Attendees)	Number of Scholars				
	Grade K-2	Grade 3-5	Grade 6-8	Female	Male
Boone ES (n=24)	13	11	0	10	14
Excel ES* (n=57)	20	18	15	57	0
Nalle ES (n=8)	5	3	0	6	2
Plummer ES (n=17)	0	17	0	7	10
Miller MS (n=11)	0	0	11	9	2
TOTAL	38	49	26	89	28

*Grade level not listed for 4 participants

Staffing

Groups of scholars were organized by grade level and staffed at a maximum ratio of 10:1 with 16 Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) across the five program sites. College students who had previous experience working with children were recruited to serve as SLIs.⁶ All staff completed CDF's national *Freedom Schools'* training program in June (this year delivered virtually) and local training specific to the *DC Freedom Schools'*. Each school site was managed by a site coordinator with previous *Freedom Schools'* experience. Summer staffing also included a Technology Coordinator who supported data collection (e.g., attendance and child surveys) and a Family Engagement Coordinator who supported parent engagement activities across the five sites. We detail the Family Engagement Coordinator's role later in this report (see p. 9).

Implementation Successes and Challenges

Program Successes

Based on information gleaned from interviews with staff and surveys of the children, their parents and the staff, the *DC Freedom Schools'* Summer Strong program was successfully implemented. This success is reflected in the following data from staff interview and surveys:

- **Enrichment activities.** Because of the successful partnerships with community vendors, *DC Freedom Schools'* was able to offer a wide array of diverse activities that students were motivated to engage in. Cited most often were:

⁶ At Excel, the program also incorporated summer teaching interns to work with the additional children enrolled at the school site.

- West African dance, a positive outlet for scholar energy;
- African drumming which helped scholars understand the beauty of this cultural tradition;
- Sewing which allowed scholars a hands-on focus in designing traditional African “kinsai” skirts using authentic African fabrics; and
- Music production, allowing scholars to write and produce their own music videos.



- **Collection of books.** Once again, *Freedom Schools* offered a diverse selection of books about topics that students could relate to in their own lives (e.g., conflict resolution) and in current events (e.g., racial profiling, political figures). These books stimulated rich group discussions.⁷



- **Family engagement coordinator.** While COVID presented some extra challenges to get parents involved in their children’s summer programming, the newly hired family engagement coordinator brought considerable passion and creativity to her mission of engaging families virtually, especially in the interactive modules that allowed parents to understand firsthand their children’s program experiences and provide reactions.

Surveys administered to scholars and their parents at the end of the program reflected general satisfaction with the program. Among the 53 scholars surveyed at the 5 program sites:

- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed that *Freedom Schools helped me prepare for school (92.5%)*
- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed that *I was excited about going to Freedom Schools (88.7%)*.

And while only 11 parents responded to an end-of program survey, their responses also indicated general satisfaction with the summer program⁸:

- All respondents strongly agreed that *my child was excited about going to Freedom Schools and I would recommend the Freedom Schools program to other parents (100%)*.
- Most respondents agreed that *Freedom Schools helped their child prepare for school (90.9%)*.

Program Challenges

These program successes took place despite several challenges, some related to ongoing concerns about COVID-19. Staff cited challenges in four areas in implementing the summer program:

- **Site dynamics.** While DCPS gave the school sites considerable autonomy to structure their summer programs, the *DC Freedom Schools* found themselves having to fit their program into the existing

⁷ Books most often cited by staff as scholar favorites included *Chess Rumble*, *Kamala*, *Joey*, *Pinned*, and *Enemy Pie*.

⁸ See all parent survey responses in Appendix B, Figure 3.

structure at each school site. At some school sites, staff complained about lack of adequate communication with DCPS about program scheduling and expectations. For example, some sites permitted field trips and others did not. One site asked that *Freedom Schools* provide summer programming for additional students using teacher interns who had not received the *Freedom Schools* training.

- **COVID.** The *DC Freedom Schools* program is very communal in nature. COVID imposed restrictions on how space could be used, in terms of social distancing, classroom composition, and mixing kids from different classrooms. This impacted the *Freedom Schools* culture.
- **Training.** Due to COVID concerns the national *Freedom Schools* training was once again held virtually. Staff didn't benefit as much from virtual training as in-person training because they could not see the program practices modeled in action. In addition the virtual training could not capture the communal passion and excitement generated when staff members are trained in-person as a large group. Staff also mentioned the need for additional training in classroom management (“that training can never prepare you for all the different kinds of behavior you're likely to encounter”) and the difficulty working with children who are not yet reading.
- **Parent engagement.** The *Freedom Schools* program is built around parent engagement. Again due to COVID concerns, parents were not allowed on campus. The family engagement coordinator was able to reach out to parents virtually but this in turn exposed how schools typically engage with families, more from a “deficit” perspective that parents have too much on their plates to be involved rather than an assets perspective and what parents have to offer. Again because of COVID, the program was not able to hold parent registration meetings which would have helped with recruitment and getting programs off to a smoother start. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated the continuing challenges around parent engagement.

Positive Impacts on Children

Through the program's critical components (Harmabee, Integrated Reading Curriculum, enrichment activities, and social justice themes), *DC Freedom Schools* Summer Strong programs strive to support scholars to maintain or improve their reading skills as well as their character and social emotional skills. As part of the program evaluation plan for their 21st CCLC grant, CDF included two measurable objectives to reflect these desired positive outcomes for children enrolled in their summer programs:

- **Measurable Objective #2:** *50% of regular attendees will show improvement in their reading skills during the 6-week summer program, as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory.*
- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the 6-week summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement) and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.*

Evaluation results regarding scholars' reading and character/social-emotional skills follow.

Reading

The Children's Defense Fund has implemented its patented Integrated Reading Curriculum in its Freedom School after-school and summer programs for many years to provide its scholars with reading materials and instruction at four grade level spans, K–2, 3–5, 6–8 and 9–12. Books are selected to engage young readers in stories with characters and themes that are relatable and inspiring. SLIs receive national training on

how to implement the IRC, using a newly developed 300-page curriculum guide.

CDF's national evaluation of the *Freedom Schools'* summer programs uses the Basic Reading Inventory⁹ to measure scholar's instructional reading levels at the beginning of its 6-week summer program and again at the end of the summer program. The BRI assesses sight vocabulary (graded word lists), decoding skills (graded reading passages) and reading comprehension (corresponding comprehension questions) to estimate the child's instructional reading level, with materials at the pre-primer and primer levels and grades 1 through 12.

Summer reading programs for children in low-achieving schools have in recent years focused on preventing summer reading loss as well as strengthening children's foundational reading skills [see CDF training materials]. With the pandemic, most DCPS students have experienced only virtual instruction in school year 2020-21 and Summer Strong was typically their first in-person instruction since schools shut down in March 2020. Consequently we have focused our assessment efforts on the extent to which scholars maintained or improved their instructional reading levels over the course of the 6-week summer program. The BRI was administered individually to children in attendance during Week 1 of the 6-week programs at Boone and Excel and again to those children in attendance during Week 6.¹⁰

The capacity of the testing to measure true change in scholars' reading skills was limited by several factors, most notably the short duration of the summer program, diminished program attendance in Week 6, and among some scholar's a lack of interest in reading in a testing situation only 5 weeks after the original assessment and during the last week when program staff and scholars were engaged in clean-up and closure activities. Still among the 51 scholars available to test during the Week 1 and the 32 scholars tested in Week 6, we saw considerable variation in initial reading levels and modest average growth over the 6-week program.

Considerable Variation in Initial Reading Levels

- At Boone initial reading levels ranged from scholars who had just completed grades K and 1 and were not yet reading to grade 1 and 2 scholars reading at or above grade level (grade levels 2 through 7) to grade 3 – 5 scholars reading at or above grade level (grade levels 4 through 10).
- At Excel, initial reading levels ranged from scholars who had just completed grades K and 1 and were not yet reading to grade 2 scholars reading above grade level (grade levels 3 through 7) to grade 3 – 5 scholars reading at grade levels pre-primer through 8), and finally grade 6 and 7 scholars reading at grade levels 4 through 11.
- Such variation in reading levels, even among children already grouped by grade level, presented challenges for staff in accommodating a wide range of reading levels in each grade level group.

Modest Improvement in Reading Levels

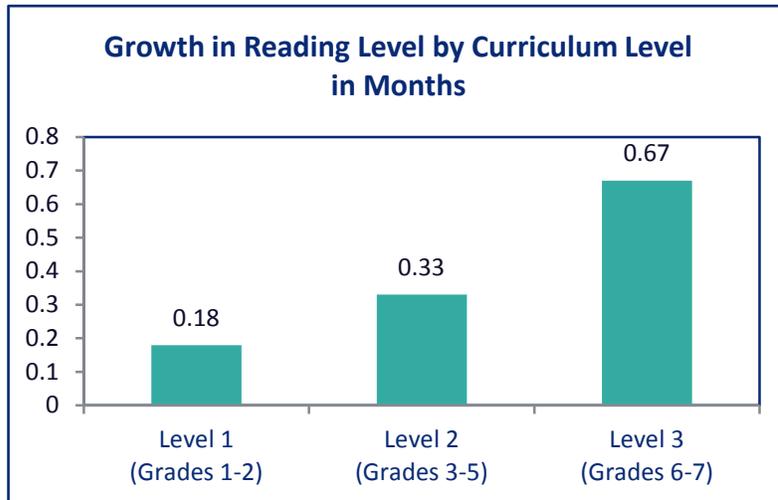
Despite these initial challenges, we found that scholars' instructional reading levels improved at all instructional levels and on average by approximately 3 months over the 6-week summer program. This improvement included about 2 months of growth at Level 1 (grades 1-2), 3 months of growth at Level 2 (grades 3-5) and 7 months of growth at Level 3 (grades 6-7), as can be seen in Table 5 and Figure 1.

⁹ Johns, Jerry L. (2012). Basic Reading Inventory, 11th Edition: Pre-Primer through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012.

¹⁰ The BRI was administered by four experienced assessment specialists trained specifically on the BRI. At Boone, all scholars in attendance were included in the pre- and post-test samples (n=21 and n=13). At Excel, since Week 1 attendance exceeded the 30 scholars planned, we capped the pre-test at 30 students (n=30 and n=19).

Table 5. Baseline and End-of-Program Reading Levels

Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) Level	Instructional Reading Levels	
	Baseline Week 1	End of Program Week 6
Level 1 (Grades 1-2) (n=11)	4.00	4.18
Level 2 (Grades 3-5) (n=6)	5.17	5.50
Level 3 (Grades 6-7) (n=3)	8.33	9.00

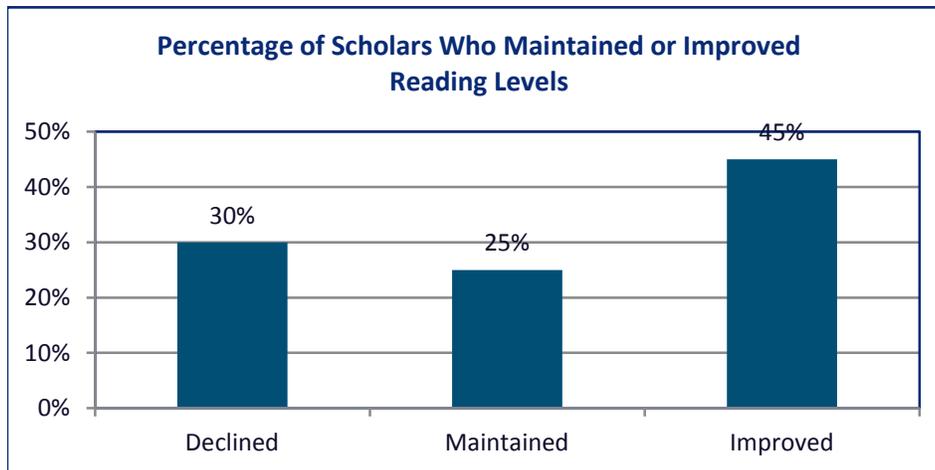
Figure 1. Growth in Instructional Reading Levels

We noted however that this analysis of reading growth was limited by several factors:

- Among the scholars who had just completed kindergarten or grade 1 in the spring, most were non-readers when tested at the beginning of the program and still not reading at the end of the program in Week 6. The program is not designed to teach children to read but rather to build upon their foundational reading skills. Non-readers were omitted from this analysis.
- Only about two-thirds of those scholars tested at baseline were available for post-testing in Week 6 (13/21 Boone scholars and 19/30 Excel scholars). In addition we omitted 2 scholars from this analysis whose results were inconclusive.
- This left 20 scholars who were already reading in Week 1 and on average improved their reading skills by 3 months over the 6-week program.

We also examined reading improvement against the grant's measurable objective that is the percentage of scholars whose instructional reading levels was maintained or improved over the 6-week program. Most scholars maintained (n=5) or gained (n=9) in instructional reading levels and did not experience summer reading loss (n=6); see Figure 2. Thus 70% of scholars maintained or improved their instructional reading level, exceeding the 50% target suggested by measurable objective #2.

Figure 2. Percentage of Scholars, Maintaining or Improving Reading Levels



Finally, in light of the challenges in measuring reading growth in a small sample of scholars and over a short-6-week program, we also examined the relationship between scholar attendance and reading growth. We found a modest positive correlation ($r=.35$) with scholars who had attended more sessions more likely to improve or at least maintain their reading levels. See Table 6.

Table 6. Reading Level Changes and Attendance

Scholars Change in Reading Level	ADA (% Days Present)
Declined (n=6)	71.2%
Maintained (n=5)	85.5%
Improved (n=9)	84.6%

Child Attitudes

In previous national evaluations, CDF administered a Child Survey to gauge the impact of their program on the promoted character traits: academic engagement, civic engagement, self-empowerment, and conflict resolution. Starting in 2020, the same 15 survey items have also been used to measure the impact of the program on the social and emotional learning (SEL) skills considered so important in the healthy development of youth: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.¹¹

To evaluate the impact of the Summer Strong program on child attitudes in these two important areas, character and SEL, we implemented the CDF Child Survey in two different ways across the 5 program sites:

- 1) At Boone ES and Excel ES, where the program served scholars for 6 weeks, we were able to administer the same survey individually to students during Week 1 and again during Week 6 to measure any change in their attitudes over the course of the program. This pre-post comparison provides a stronger measure of any changes in attitudes.
- 2) At Miller MS, Nalle ES and Plummer ES, where the program served scholars in-person for 3 weeks,

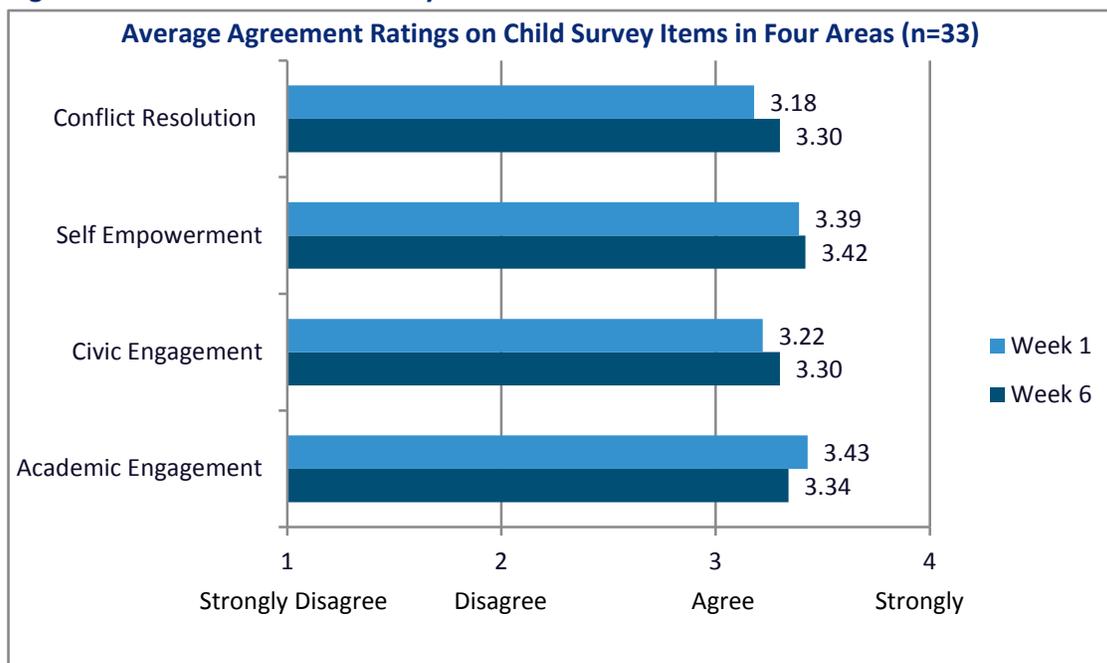
¹¹ The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed an SEL framework comprised of these five skills. The benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL) are well-researched, with evidence demonstrating that an education that promotes SEL yields positive results for students. Analyses of hundreds of studies show SEL leads to beneficial outcomes related to: social and emotional skills; attitudes about self and school; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic performance (CASEL, 2021).

we administered the survey during Week 3 of the program. Items were phrased to reflect the extent to which scholar attitudes had changed after participating in the *CDF Freedom Schools* summer program. This post-only survey is a weaker measure but we were able to include in the sample scholars from Boone ES and Excel ES as well.

Pre and Post Child Surveys

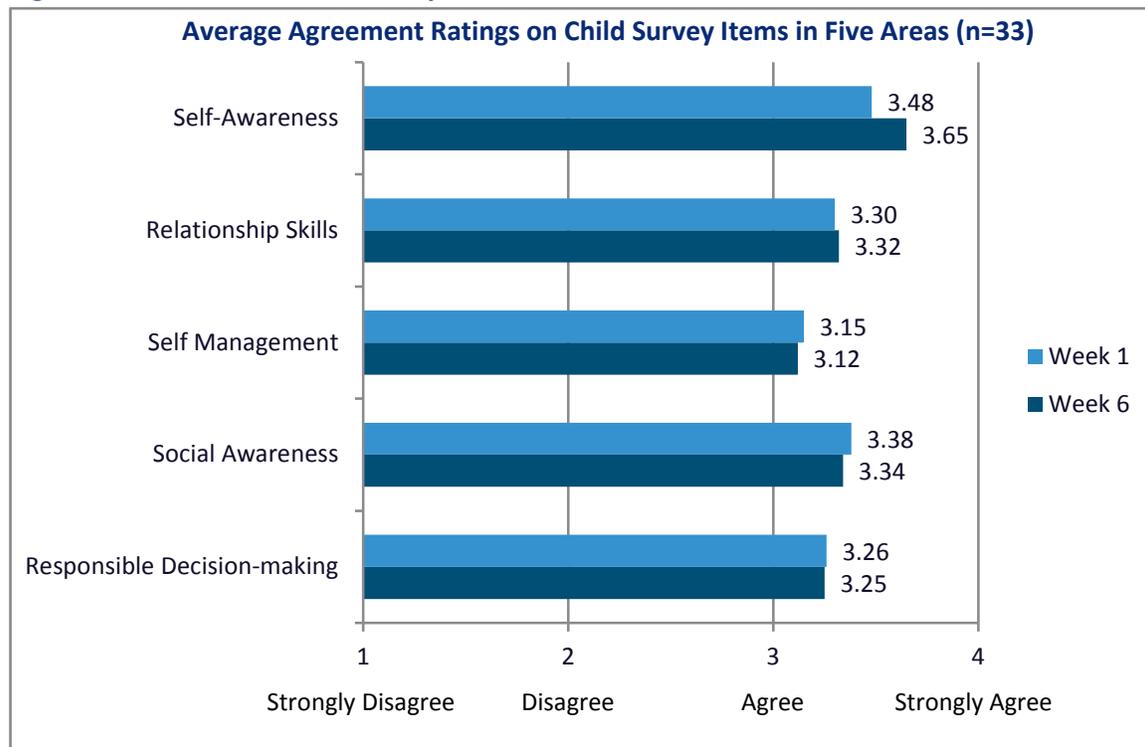
Of the 61 regular DC Freedom School participants at Boone and Excel, 51 completed the survey during Week 1 (baseline) and 33 were available to complete the survey again during Week 6 (end of program). A comparison of responses of only those 33 scholars who completed the survey at baseline and again at the end of program, suggested a positive but modest impact on three of the four character skills measured by the survey, as shown in Figure 3. At baseline and again at post-test, the respondents averaged between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale indicating agreement with items reflecting the four desired character traits: conflict resolution (3.18 **up** to 3.30), self-empowerment (3.39 **up** to 3.42), civic engagement (3.22 **up** to 3.30), and academic engagement (3.43 **down** to 3.34). These modest differences were not statistically significant (paired student t-test, n=33).

Figure 3. Pre and Post-Child Survey Results on Four Character Traits



Responses to these same survey items were analyzed to reflect five social-emotional learning skills considered important in the healthy development of youth. The comparison of the responses of only those 33 scholars who completed the survey at baseline and again at the end of program, suggested a positive but modest impact on one of the five SEL skills measured by the survey, as shown in Figure X. At baseline and again at post-test, the respondents averaged between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale indicating agreement with items reflecting the five desired SEL skills: self-awareness (3.48 **up** to 3.65), relationship skills (3.30 and 3.32), self-management (at 3.15 and 3.12), social awareness (at 3.38 and 3.34), and responsible decision-making (at 3.26 and 3.25). Again, these modest differences were not statistically significant (paired student t-test, n=33).

Figure 4. Pre and Post-Child Survey Results on Five SEL Skills



The pre and post testing at Boone and Excel allowed us to also examine the program's performance against one of the measurable objectives in the 21stCCLC grant evaluation plan:

- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the 6-week summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement) and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.*

Applying this standard to the four character traits and the five SEL skills for the 32 regular attendees¹² surveyed and allowing for several scholars who measured at the same level at baseline and 6 weeks later, the program approached or exceeded this measurable objective, as can be seen in Figures 5 and 6.¹³

¹² We eliminated from this analysis one grade K scholar who attended less than 50% of the program days.

¹³ Note that the SEL skills were not included in the measurable objective as originally written.

Figure 5. Program Performance on Character Traits

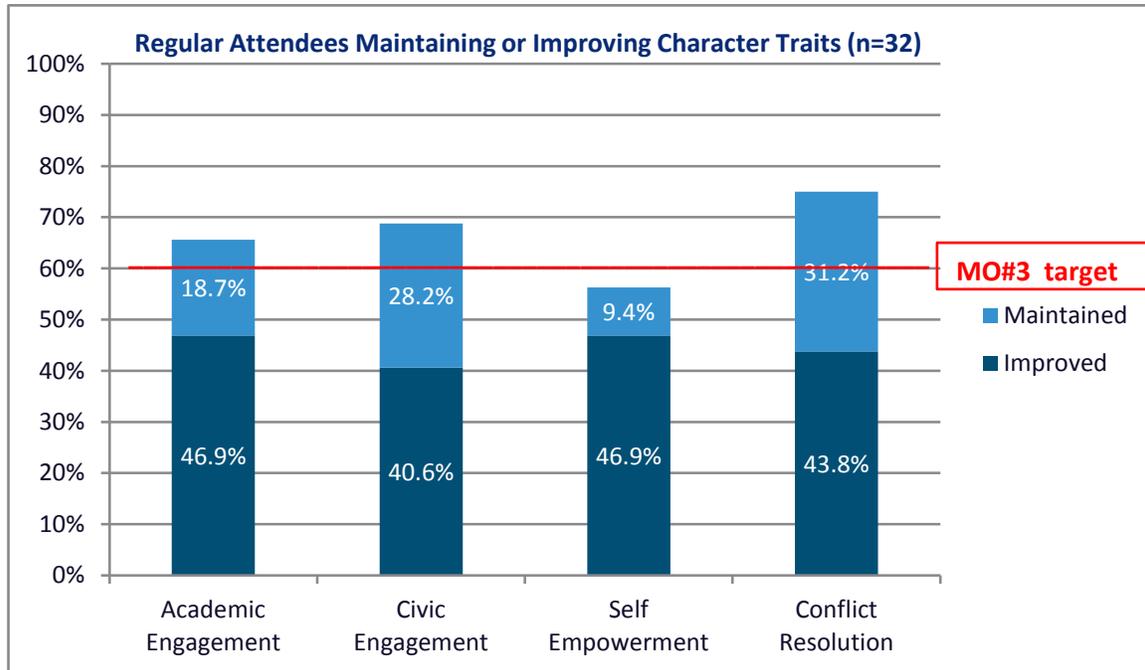
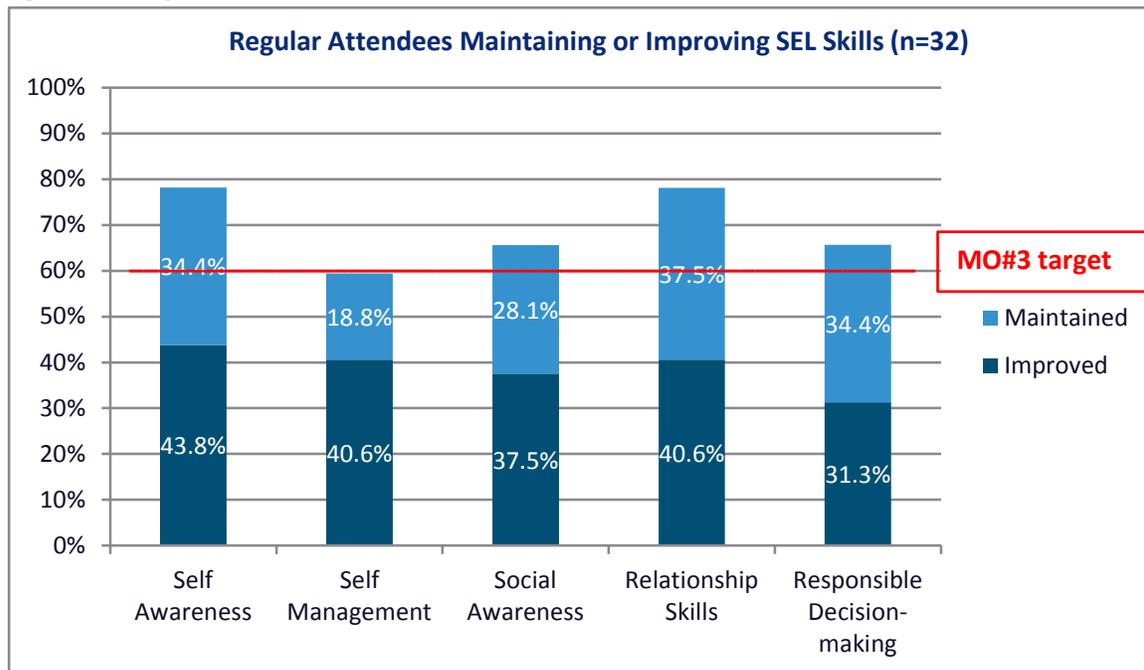


Figure 6. Program Performance on SEL Skills



Post-Only Child Surveys

Scholars attending the three 3-week programs, Miller MS, Nalle ES, and Plummer ES as well as scholars attending the two 6-week programs, Boone ES and Excel ES, completed Child Surveys during the last week of their program, asking them reflect on how their experience at *CDF Freedom Schools* had impacted their

attitudes. Among the 53 scholars who completed these end-of-program surveys¹⁴, we found that:

Four character traits

- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed with statements measuring the four character traits with average ratings ranging from 3.26 (academic engagement) to 3.46 (self-empowerment) on a 4-point agreement scale.
- Scholars reported that their **self-empowerment** was most strongly impacted by their program experience with more than two-thirds of the respondents strongly agreeing with the following statements:
 - *I am more confident to achieve my goals (75.5%).*
 - *I feel more proud of myself (71.2%).*
 - *I feel supported by an adult (67.9%).*

Five social-emotional skills

- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed with statements measuring the five SEL skills with average ratings ranging from 3.19 (self-management) to 3.65 (self-awareness) on a 4-point agreement scale.
- Scholars reported that their **self-awareness** was most strongly impacted by their program experience with more than two-thirds of the respondents strongly agreeing with the following statements:
 - *I am more confident to achieve my goals (75.5%).*
 - *I feel more proud of myself (71.2%).*
 - *I am more confident about learning all the topics taught in my class. (67.9%).*

The results from all 15 child survey items can be found in the Appendix B, Figures 1 and 2.

Parent Perceptions

We also surveyed parents of scholars about how their child had changes as a result of participation in the *CDF Freedom Schools*. While it was more challenging to elicit parent responses due to COVID restrictions at the school sites, 11 parents (representing three of the five sites) did respond to follow-up emails asking them to complete an online survey. These parents agreed or strongly agreed with statements suggesting that their child had grown in self-empowerment, civic engagement, conflict resolution and academic engagement. Two survey items reflected parent perceptions of the strongest program impacts on their children:

- *My child more strongly believes that he/she can make a difference. (81.8% strongly agree)*
- *My child is more likely to vote when he/she is an adult. (72.7% strongly agree)*

See Appendix B, Figure 3 for these parent survey results.

Positive Impacts on Staff

One of the goals of *CDF Freedom Schools* is to promote the character skills of the Servant Leader Interns (SLIs), through both staff training and their experience working with children at risk of academic failure. Similar to its work with children, the program strives to foster in its interns a sense of self-empowerment, a focus on academic and career pursuits, and civic responsibility. Staff members were surveyed at the end of the summer

¹⁴ The end-of-program survey sample included scholars from Boone ES (n=13), Excel ES (n=20), Nalle ES (n=5), Plummer ES (n=9) and Miller MS (n=6).

program on the extent to which their experience as an SLI had changed their opinion about statements reflecting these three character traits: self-empowerment, academic/career engagement, and civic engagement.¹⁵ Ten of the 21 SLIs and site coordinators completed the survey, representing four of the five sites. Almost all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the 12 survey items, suggesting a positive impact of their experience as an SLI on each of the character traits measured (see Appendix B, Figure 4).

Highlights included:

- The SLI experience most strongly impacted self-empowerment with an average rating of 3.88 on the 4-point agreement scale, followed by civic engagement at 3.78 and academic/career engagement at 3.50.
- All respondents strongly agreed with two statements, reinforcing the impact of the program's summer theme on it's staff:
 - *I feel more confident that I can make a difference around me (4.00).*
 - *I feel less likely to give up when life gets challenging (4.00)*
- Respondents were in less confident about the impact of the program on their career goals, not surprising given that most of the SLIs were college students:
 - *My career goals are set. (3.20)*
 - *I am more committed to a career in the education field .(3.50)*

Overall, the survey showed that the program had a positive impact on staff attitudes about self-empowerment (3.88), civic engagement (3.78), and academic/career engagement (3.50). In interviews conducted during the last week of the program or shortly thereafter with 9 of the 21 summer staff members, these SLIs and site coordinators most frequently reported that their experience in the program had increased their confidence, specifically in their ability to work with children and other adults. Other personal impacts cited by these summer staff included:

- Increased motivation to become an educator and work with children;
- More interest in community work and volunteerism;
- Improved management and leadership skills; and
- Feelings of empowerment and excitement about the upcoming school year.

SLI: *The program gave me more of a love for helping my community!*

SLI: *This experience made me grow as a person in ways that I did not really expect. It made me more confident and . . . I feel like I've become more patient and understanding.*

SLI: *This experience has opened my eyes to the needs in my community and has motivated me to help change my community.*

Parent Engagement and Family Involvement

Following US Department of Education guidance on the characteristics of successful after-school and summer programs,¹⁶ the Children's Defense Fund has incorporated a parent engagement component to promote strong family involvement in DC Freedom School programs. As part of their 21st CCLC grant evaluation plan for their after-school and summer programs, CDF focused one of four measurable objectives specifically on parent engagement:

¹⁵ Survey items were designed to measure these three traits. A factor analysis conducted on similarly-worded items in a national survey of Freedom School SLIs during summer 2020 confirmed the survey's conceptual framework.

¹⁶ USED, *Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-School Programs* (April, 2000).

- *Measurable Objective #4. Programs will offer at least three academically-enriched student/family events [across the year] designed to increase parent engagement and knowledge of their student's academic program, as measured by program activity logs and surveys.*

While scholars were able to attend summer programs in-person, COVID restricted parent access to these programs, that is, parents were not allowed on DCPS school campuses, even at drop-off and pick-up when staff would typically have opportunities for informal communication with parents. Still, CDF has a much broader vision of family involvement with parents viewed as assets and engaged as partners in supporting the academic and social justice goals of *DC Freedom Schools*. CDF included a Family Engagement Coordinator in their summer *DC Freedom Schools* staffing with explicit goals around engaging and involving families:

- Set up personal communication with each family about the summer program schedule, scholar activities and parent events
- Design and disseminate interactive modules to encourage parents to become engaged in their child's summer program activities
- Develop and conduct family events that provide relevant and actionable information about how parents can become more engaged in their child's education and support their scholar outside of school programming.

In order to meet the 21st CCLC evaluation plan's objective regarding family events, we will briefly describe the summer activities of the Family Engagement Coordinator and those aspects that could be quantified, including parent surveys administered at the end of the summer program.

Family Engagement Coordinator

The coordinator conducted a series of activities to personally communicate with scholar parents and engage their families in supporting *DC Freedom Schools*. Specifically, she

- Communicated with the families of 77 registered scholars, via phone, email and text and set up a weekly case management support system
- Organized virtual family engagement activities around the *Freedom Schools'* theme "I can make a difference," for example,
 - Applying the theme to help parents understand how they can make a difference in their children's lives;
 - Helping parents to engage in 6 weekly "I can make a difference" scholar themes (at the progressive levels of self, family, community, country, world, and social action)
- Developed and shared six independent interactive modules (via Nearpod), which included pre-recorded videos, virtually pulling parents into their child's *Freedom Schools* programming
- Developed and conducted two family-centered virtual workshops (over Zoom for 17 attendees) in Weeks 3 and 4. These workshops were offered in partnership with the DC Board of Education, Office of Student Advocacy and Black Swan Academy to provide families with strategies to better support their children in school, including for example establishing or joining their school's PTO
- Consistent with the CDF's public policy agenda, helped families learn about and access the 2021 Child Tax Credit.

Despite of the lack of in-person contact with parents over the course of the summer program, several parents were able to attend the culminating scholar celebration and recognition activities during the last week of the program, viewing these activities on screen in another room.



Parent Survey

As part of the national evaluation of its Freedom School programs, CDF has developed a Parent Survey for administration at the end of their summer programs. Typically this survey is completed by parents at program drop-off or pick-up or when attending parent engagement events in-person. Given the COVID restrictions which limited program staff's access to parents, parents were instead asked via email to complete an online survey during the last week of their child's program, either in Week 3 for the programs at Miller, Nalle and Plummer or in Week 6 for the programs at Boone and Plummer. With such limited access to parents, only 11 online surveys were completed, representing three of the five program sites: Boone, Excel and Nalle.

The survey included four items asking parents to reflect on how their participation in the *CDF Freedom Schools* program had changed them, in terms of civic and academic engagement. Nearly all parent respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- *I am more likely to volunteer with a group to help my community. (100%).*
- *I am more likely to vote. (91%)*
- *I have a better understanding of how to help my child be successful. (100%)*
- *I plan to be more engaged in my child's school work next year. (91%)*

Parents were also asked about any parent meetings they attended and provided the following relevant comments:

- *The parent meetings were very informative and helpful. At every meeting we parents were reminded that we have support and that's important.*
- *I enjoyed the communication and the topics covered.*

Full survey results can be seen in Appendix B.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Children's Defense Fund met the challenge of transitioning children from more than a year of mostly virtual instruction to once again attending in-person programs with their peers. CDF worked with DCPS to develop and structure summer programs at five school sites, all of which were able to implement the critical components of the *CDF Freedom Schools* program model: Harambee!, the Integrated Reading Curriculum, a diverse selection of enrichment activities, social action events and parent engagement opportunities. While somewhat impacted by COVID protocols and less than 100% attendance by children during summer vacation, the program still resulted in modest improvement in children's average instructional reading levels and in their perceptions regarding the promoted character traits and social-emotional learning skills. And staff also expressed positive changes in some of these same character traits (i.e., civic engagement, self-empowerment, and academic/career engagement). Based on the challenges the summer program faced and the information shared through staff interviews and surveys, we offer recommendations in three areas: staff training, parent engagement, coordination with school sites.

- **Staff training.** One of the characteristics of effective expanded learning time programs is high quality staffing (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The *DC Freedom Schools* summer program is primarily staffed by college students studying in fields related to working with children such as education or social work. These Servant Leader Interns typically have prior experience working with children and participate in the one-week national training provided by the Children’s Defense Fund. Still feedback gathered from the current program staff on implementation challenges suggest that staff would benefit from additional training, particularly in best practices in classroom management, reading instruction (especially for children not yet reading), and the cultural foundations of the *Freedom Schools* approach. This training should include conversations around culture, class, sexuality, and poverty. In addition several staff mentioned the benefits of in-person (over virtual) training in terms of modeling program practices and feeding off of the passion and energy of a larger group.
- **Parent engagement.** Another characteristic of quality expanded learning time programs is strong family involvement. *DC Freedom Schools* has recognized the importance of parent engagement and each year has planned events and activities to get parents involved in the program (e.g., book clubs, family field trips). Starting with parent outreach to recruit scholars, effective communication with parents to ensure families can support their scholars, and finally program activities that meet parent needs, *DC Freedom Schools* has at times struggled to get parents effectively engaged in their child’s summer program, especially this summer when parents were not permitted on the school campuses due to COVID restrictions. The newly hired Family Engagement Coordinator was very creative and dedicated in her efforts to reach out to parents virtually, especially through interactive materials that parents could view on their own time and virtual events that met specific parent needs (e.g., how to better advocate for your child in an educational setting). Still a relatively small proportion of participants’ families interacted with these modules or attended these virtual events. CDF recognizes the need to continue to work with schools on how to better engage parents in their child’s educational experience.
- **Coordination with DCPS.** A third characteristic of effective summer programs are the linkages or coordination between the summer program and school sites. This coordination has both a logistical and an instructional component. Logistically, because these summer programs are working in DCPS school buildings with DCPS students, there needs to be good communication with these schools sites regarding expectations around shared space and possibly shared activities. And instructionally, *DC Freedom Schools’* summer program includes components that support the DCPS instructional program, in particular the Integrated Reading Curriculum, and thus would benefit from more information about children’s reading abilities upon entering the summer program. In addition, *DC Freedom Schools* has not been able to access DCPS student data for participants in order to for example, check instructional reading levels or evaluate the program’s impact on academic achievement or reading performance. Coordination with DCPS regarding student data should improve in the 2021-22 school year as CDF will submit a research application to DCPS to access participant data. And *DC Freedom Schools* probable focus on homework assistance in Fall 2022 will necessitate better communication with DCPS teachers about their instruction.

APPENDIX A: References

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APPENDIX B: Survey Results

Figure B1: Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Survey Items Measuring Four Character Traits

Figure B2. Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Five SEL Skills

Figure B3. Parent Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Areas: Child, Parent, *Freedom Schools* Experience

Figure B4. SLI Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Character Traits

Figure B1. Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Survey Items Measuring Four Character Traits (n=53 Scholars)

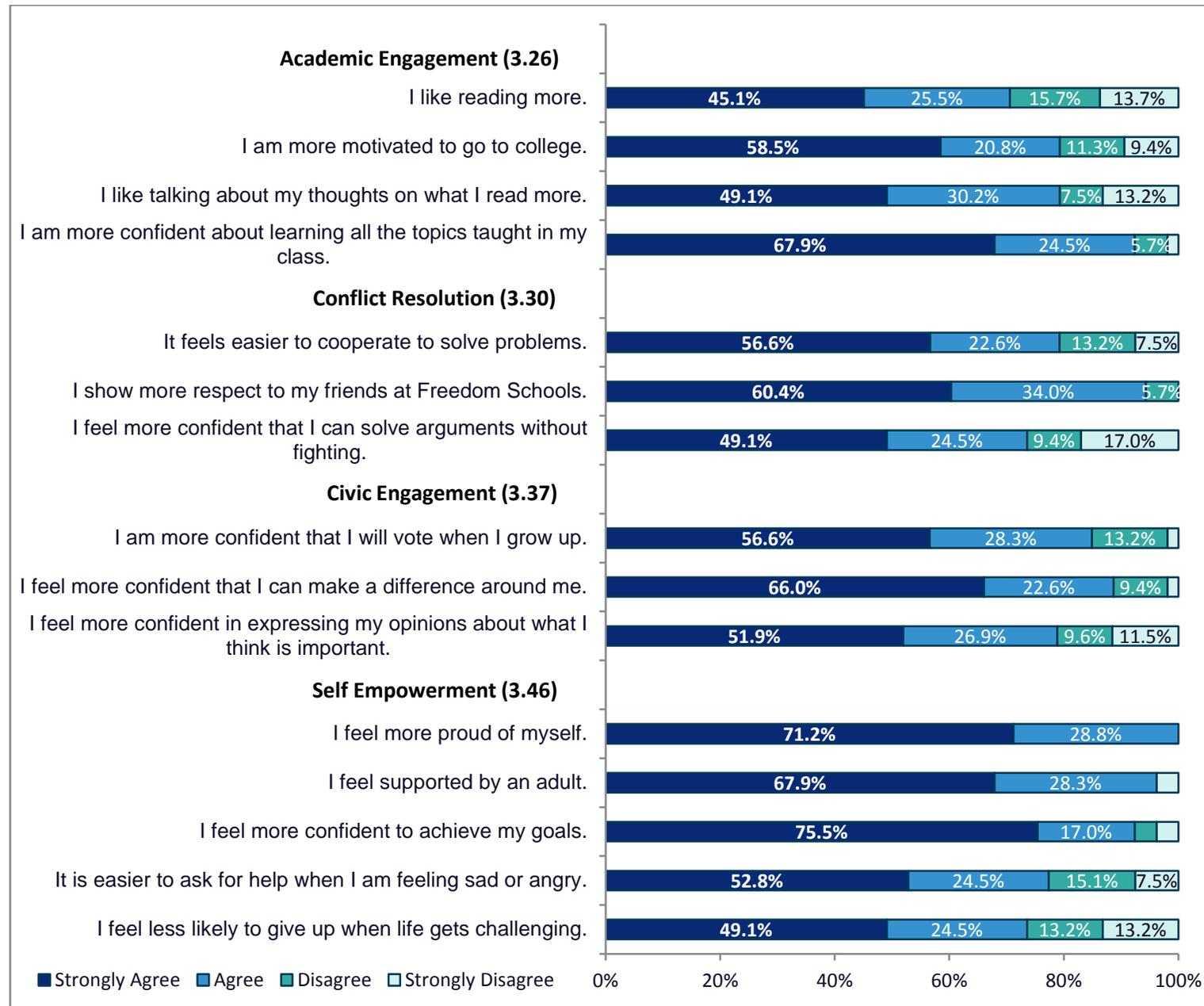


Figure B2. Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Five SEL Skills (n=53 Scholars)

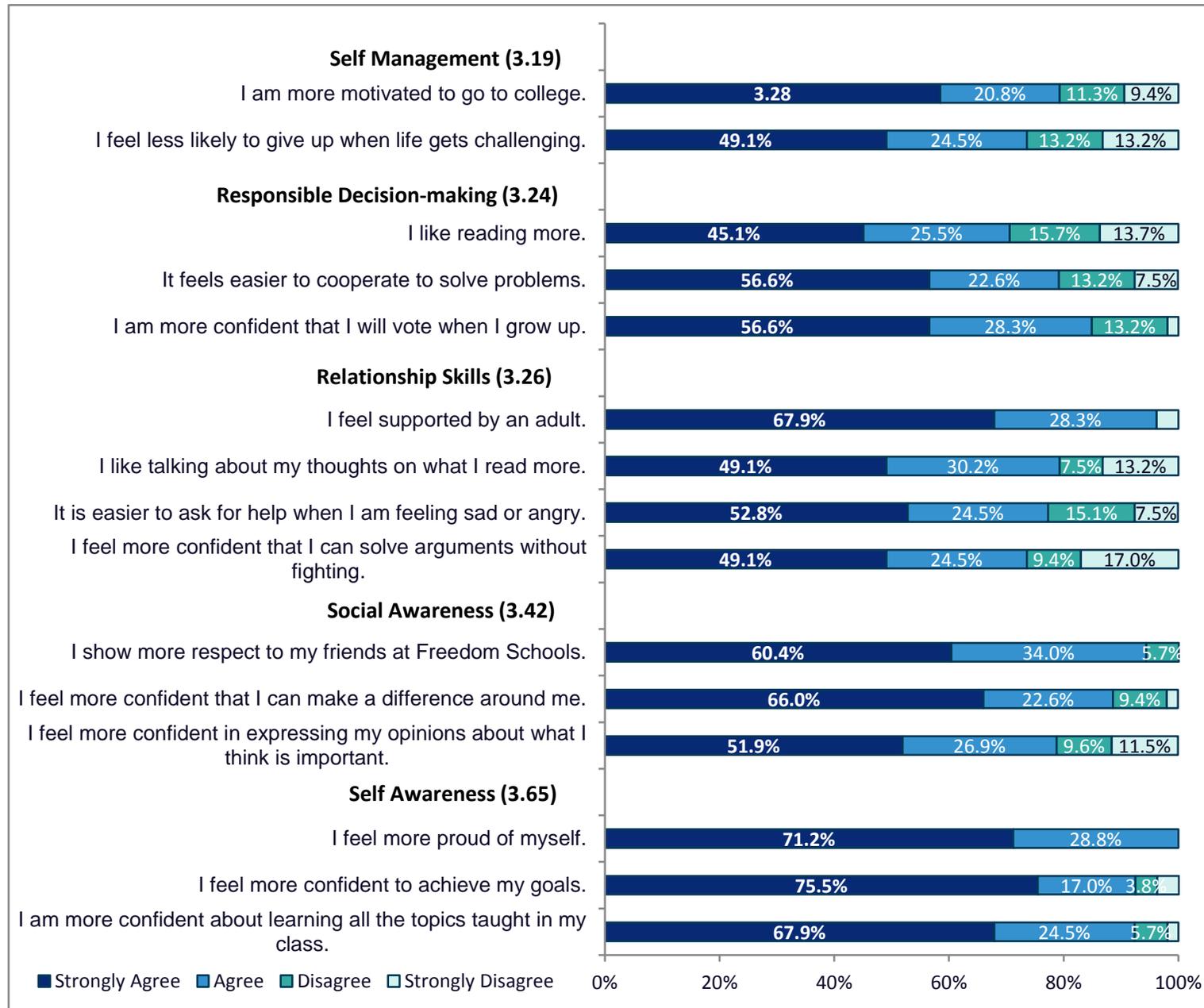


Figure B3. Parent Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Areas: Child, Parent, *Freedom Schools* Experience (n=11)

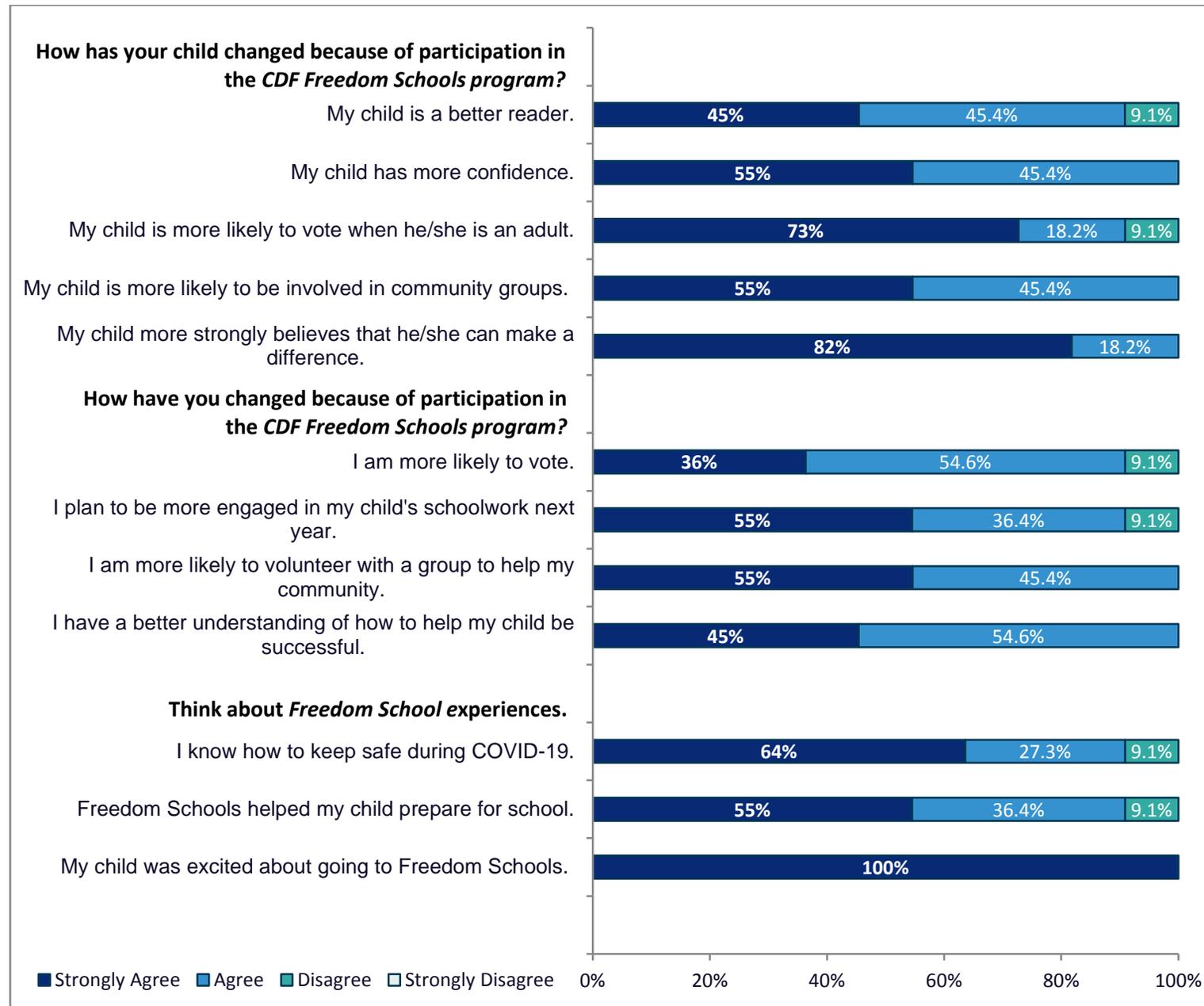


Figure B4. SLI Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Character Traits (n=10 SLI)

