

After-School Sessions Expanding the Reach of Summer Program

Study shows children who took part improved their reading skills.

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Following a day of classwork, about 40 students from neighboring schools gather in the media center at Fairview Elementary School for a celebration of a day well spent. After a reading from a carefully selected book, the elementary and middle school students chant and cheer during a harambe session, named after a Swahili term that means “pulling together.”

For a few hours each afternoon, the students in the Freedom School program at Fairview do just that as they tackle homework, challenge each other in educational games, and join in an extended literacy period that includes reading time and related discussions and activities.

Educators working in the program in Dayton, Ohio, and other sites around the country are hoping that by adapting a successful summer school model to expand students’ learning opportunities throughout the school year, they’ll give the participants an academic edge.

The Freedom Schools, sponsored by the Children’s Defense Fund, a prominent Washington-based advocacy group, now offers after-school programs in schools, churches, and public facilities in disadvantaged communities in six states, and is poised to expand to other urban districts. Local programs are responsible for securing their own funding to run the schools.

“The purpose of the program is to boost reading, in particular, and to get [students] to enjoy reading and explore books,” said Donna Gilmore, a 3rd grade teacher in the 17,000-student Dayton district who is the site coordinator for the Freedom School at Fairview Elementary. “Some of these students would just be hanging out after school playing video games or watching TV...but at the Freedom School, they get support for what they are doing in school.”

Roots in Civil Rights

That support includes homework help and tutoring by university students who serve as leaders in the program, as well as a structured reading curriculum that aims to build students’ comprehension through silent and group reading and extended discussion of literary texts that the boys and girls then get to bring home.

The college students are trained to conduct the harambe, as well as the Freedom Schools’ reading curriculum.

Educators, policymakers, and community activists have been pushing for increases in school time, including after-school programs, as a way to expand learning opportunities

and better prepare students for the rigors of college and the workplace. ("Consensus on Learning Time Builds," Sept. 24, 2008.)

The Freedom Schools initiative was launched by the CDF in 1992, but traces its roots to 1964, when civil rights organizations organized summer classes for black children in Mississippi. The CDF expanded the model—designed primarily as a summer program that now serves more than 9,000 students in 61 cities—to provide after-school support for students in New Orleans and in Mississippi communities after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which hit the Gulf Coast in 2005.

Since then, sites have been added in Illinois, Minnesota, New York, and Ohio. Located at schools, churches, and community centers where there have been successful summer sessions, the after-school programs follow a similar model. They provide healthy snacks, celebrations of hard work and purposeful living, tutoring and homework help, and daily reading and discussion activities aligned with the local school curriculum.

"Freedom Schools have always been conceived of as parallel institutions to school, and we work alongside schools ... in helping children succeed in the regular school day," said Jeanne Middleton Hairston, the national director of the program for the CDF. "It's about providing a safe and nurturing place for the children to come during out-of-school time to get homework help, build cultural awareness, and develop a strong appreciation for reading and learning."

Parents are also recruited to work as volunteers in the program and are encouraged to attend regular workshops on child development, civic responsibility, and related topics.

A recent study on the Freedom Schools summer program in Kansas City, Mo., for children in kindergarten through 8th grade found that participants' reading skills and their attitudes toward learning improved during the school year.

The study was funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, which provides financial support for the Freedom Schools. (The foundation also underwrites reporting on math, science, and technology education in Education Week.)

The researchers followed more than 2,000 children who participated in the program at 18 Freedom School sites throughout Kansas City over a three-year period.

Students who took part in the program over that period improved their reading skills at a significantly greater rate than similar students in the district who did not attend Freedom Schools, according to the report, conducted by Philliber Research Associates, a New York City-based evaluation company.

Other recent research suggests that high-quality after-school programs can have a positive effect on students' achievement, behavior, work habits, and feelings of security.

Eye on the Book

In Dayton, Ms. Gilmore has seen those results among more than 200 students who have attended the 4-year-old summer program there. She follows those children throughout the school year, gathering school report card data and testimonials from parents.

“Within the summer program, from what the scholars and parents report, their grades have improved, and their reading comprehension especially has improved,” Ms. Gilmore said.

The veteran educator is confident that the after-school program, which is just beginning its first year, will have similar effects.

Already, she said, students are showing enthusiasm about the selection of books they will read throughout the year at a pace of about four a month, as well as the hands-on activities that go with them.

As the middle school students in the program make their way through their first book, titled *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl*, they are learning about the life of a freed slave in the latter part of the 19th century and the trials her family faced after escaping slavery.

The students have begun keeping their own diaries as well, and will use their written observations and insights to guide detailed discussions about the book with classmates.

“Our activities always correlate with the book,” Ms. Gilmore said. “and leaders in the program are always trying to think about what can you do to bring that book more alive for students.”

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