



**FREEDOM
SCHOLARS**
LEARNING CENTER

NEWS LET TER

**May
2026**

May Community Highlights



Seed Sowers and Storytellers 5th Annual Finale Presentation

In May, Freedom Scholars Learning Center celebrated the completion of another powerful season of the Seed Sowers and Storytellers afterschool program.

Our 5th Annual Finale Presentation brought scholars, families, staff, partners, and community members together to recognize the learning, growth, and leadership that took place throughout the year. Scholars shared presentations, research, and reflections that showed not only what they learned, but how they are growing as readers, thinkers, speakers, and community leaders.

The evening included Harambee, scholar presentations, awards and recognitions, and the Black History Museum exhibit presentation. This year's exhibit centered leaders of color who fought for immigration rights and policy change before immigration became a national talking point or political weapon.

The finale was more than a closing ceremony. It was a public celebration of scholar voice. It reminded us that when young people are given the tools, support, and space to research their histories and speak with confidence, they do more than complete assignments. They help teach the community.

Thank you to every family, partner, staff member, volunteer, and supporter who helped make this year's Seed Sowers and Storytellers program possible.



Word RICH Literacy Growth

This month, FSLC celebrated the continued growth and impact of Word RICH, our Reading Intervention through Cultural Heritage program.

During the finale, Brandon shared end-of-year findings that highlighted the progress scholars made through targeted literacy support, one-on-one intervention, fluency practice, culturally relevant decodable texts, and reading experiences designed to build both skill and confidence.

This year, Word RICH was strengthened by three student intervention volunteers from the University of Rochester, Nazareth College, and Monroe Community College. Together, they helped cover three out of four program days and doubled the number of scholars receiving one-to-one reading interventions each day.

Across the Seed Sowers and Storytellers program year, scholars received 340 intervention sessions, totaling more than 85 hours of literacy support.

Just as important, scholars were able to name their own growth. One scholar shared, *"I'm really paying attention to what I'm reading and how I'm reading it."* Another reflected on using strategies like looking for vowel teams, CVC patterns, and R-controlled vowels when working through words.

These results matter because literacy is not just an academic measure at FSLC. Literacy is access. Literacy is confidence. Literacy is freedom. Every gain represents a scholar becoming more equipped to read the world, name their own experiences, and step forward with greater confidence.

Student Reading Growth: By the Numbers

98.6

DIBELS Points Gained

Average score increase per student

32.26%

DIBELS Percent Increase

Average percent increase per student

62.99%

Comprehension Growth

Average increase for grades 3–6

104.75%

Oral Reading Fluency

Average increase for grades 1–6

247.97%

Word Reading Fluency

Average increase for grades K–3 — the highest growth area

✔ Across every grade band and every metric, students made meaningful, measurable gains.



Decision Day: Celebrating Our Former Scholars and Junior Servant Leaders

In May, Freedom Scholars Learning Center proudly celebrated Decision Day, a national milestone when high school seniors commit to the college or university they will attend.

For FSLC, this moment is especially meaningful because it allows us to recognize former scholars and Junior Servant Leaders as they take the next step in their educational journeys. These young leaders have grown through our programs, supported younger scholars, served their community, and now continue forward into higher learning.

We proudly recognize one of our former scholars and Junior Servant Leaders as she begins her college journey, and we wish her continued success in all her future endeavors.

Decision Day reminds our younger scholars that their futures are full of possibility. Surrounded by proud families, dedicated staff, and a supportive community, our seniors are stepping forward with confidence, purpose, and the knowledge that their village is cheering them on.

Verizon + NextCorps Environmental Learning Project

In May, scholars participated in a special environmental learning project in partnership with Verizon and NextCorps.

Across five special programming sessions, scholars explored environmentalism, sustainability, recycling, and the ways everyday choices impact the world around them. They learned about different types of pollution, including land, air, and water pollution, while also discussing how communities can take action to protect the environment.

Scholars also engaged in hands-on activities, including making their own compost and learning about ethical fishing practices. These experiences helped connect science, environmental responsibility, and real-world problem-solving in a way scholars could see, touch, and understand.

Projects like this reflect FSLC's commitment to environmental literacy. Our scholars are not only learning about the world around them. They are being invited to care for it, question it, and imagine how they can help make it better.



4-H Capstone and Plant Care Projects

Our 4-H programming continued in May and connected closely to finale preparation and scholar capstone work.

Throughout this learning experience, scholars explored plant care, gardening, and environmental responsibility. As part of their capstone work, they created a guide on how to take care of plants, giving them a chance to combine research, writing, observation, and creativity.

Scholars also planted their own plants and were able to take them home, extending the learning beyond the program space and into their families and homes.

This work reflects the heart of Seed Sowers and Storytellers. Scholars are planting seeds, gathering knowledge, telling stories, and learning how care, patience, and responsibility help living things grow.



Family-to-Family Workshops

Our Family-to-Family Workshops continued in May with meaningful conversations, practical wisdom, and real encouragement for families.

This month, we were grateful to welcome Monique Chatman of Equal Grounds Community Café, who shared about building a purpose-driven space that supports community healing. Her conversation explored what people need when they are grieving, how to hold space for others while running a business, and what it takes to create a mission-driven community hub.

We also welcomed Vanessa Estella Singer of Hallelujah Teas, who shared about herbal tea traditions, wellness, and faith-centered community care. Her conversation connected small business, culture, faith, and family legacy, while also lifting up her connection to Clarissa Street and Black Rochester history.

These workshops remind us that wisdom already lives in our community. Each guest brings lived experience, practical tools, and encouragement that can support families in everyday life.

If you missed either conversation, we encourage you to go back and watch.

**Have someone you would love to see featured
in a future Family-to-Family Workshop?
Send your recommendations to:
admin@freedomsscholarslc.org**

Realtor Summit Presentation

Freedom Scholars Learning Center was grateful to be represented at a recent Realtor Summit, where Jeremy Smith and Joyce Duckles presented FSLC's work to community and real estate professionals.

Their presentation helped share the story of FSLC, the needs of our scholars and families, and the importance of finding sustainable space and support as the organization continues to grow.

As FSLC continues seeking a long-term home, opportunities like this matter. They allow community leaders to hear directly about the work, understand the urgency of space and sustainability, and see how a strong physical home can help expand the impact of our programs.

We are thankful for every opportunity to share FSLC's mission with people who care about Rochester's children, families, neighborhoods, and future.



Longitudinal Study: Tracing the Long-Term Impact of Freedom Schools

Freedom Scholars Learning Center is beginning a longitudinal study to better understand the long-term impact of the Freedom School model and the Freedom School way after scholars leave the program.

This study focuses on former scholars who spent meaningful time in Freedom School programming, whether through summer, afterschool, or both. The goal is to learn where they are now, how they are continuing to grow, and how their experiences in Freedom School may have shaped their education, careers, leadership, service, and community involvement.

We know that the impact of FSLC cannot be measured only by what happens during program hours. It also shows up years later, when former scholars pursue higher education, enter the workforce, mentor others, serve their communities, start businesses, return to support FSLC, or continue living out the belief that they can make a difference.

This research will help us tell a fuller story of impact. It will also strengthen how we evaluate our work, communicate with funders, and continue building programs that support scholars not just for a season, but for life.

Freedom Scholars Learning Center: Longitudinal Impact Study

Tracking 15 survey respondents across multiple cohorts, this study measures progression into productive citizenship, defined as engagement in post-secondary education, workforce participation, vocational training, community leadership, ministry, entrepreneurship, or continued service to FSLC.

Personal Growth & Confidence

Respondents consistently described gaining self-awareness, discipline, patience, confidence, and a stronger sense of purpose through FSLC.

Reading, Learning & Academic Growth

Multiple scholars cited literacy, academic support, cultural learning, and love of learning as direct outcomes.

Leadership & Mentorship

Scholars described FSLC as a place that modeled leadership, created mentorship pathways, and gave them opportunities to return and serve younger students.

Identity & Cultural Pride

Respondents highlighted Black history, cultural curriculum, faith, service, and a stronger sense of self as formative experiences.

53.3%

Leadership Pipeline

8 of 15 returned as Junior Servant Leaders, Servant Leaders, FSLC staff, or direct organizational supporters.

53.3%

Workforce Participation

8 of 15 are currently employed outside of FSLC or actively engaged in entrepreneurial work.

93.3%

Still Connected

14 of 15 respondents remain connected with FSLC.

100%

Community Impact Mindset

Every respondent cited giving back, service, leadership, faith, mentorship, or community as a core value.

"The lessons taught to me in Freedom School have stayed with me... these lessons have not only shaped me into the community motivated and academically focused individual I am today, but have also shaped how I teach and engage with my own students." — Javonise Ryland-Buntley

Notable Individual Outcomes

- Amiah Harris — Registered Nurse
- Courtney Floyd — Patient Care Technician, aspiring OB/GYN
- Javonise Ryland-Buntley — Teacher, long-time JSL
- Olivia Hardeman — Attending SUNY Oswego
- Kim Harris — Pursuing Electrical Engineering
- Mustafa Sultan — Aspiring entrepreneur, 16+ years with FSLC
- Marquan Walker — Employed with City of Rochester
- Queen White — Sterile Processing Technician, building beauty brand
- Isabel Randolph — BME Tech / Robot Technician, former JSL
- Darius Walker — Greece Central School District employee, football coach, ministry leader
- Rico Anderson — Real estate and luxury car sales, supporting FSLC building growth

Key Takeaway

FSLC's long-term impact is evident across 15 survey respondents, with 14 of 15 remaining connected to the organization, 8 of 15 returning through leadership or direct support roles, and 8 of 15 currently participating in the workforce or entrepreneurial work outside of FSLC. Every respondent continued to express a community-minded outlook, showing that FSLC is not only supporting academic and personal growth, but also shaping scholars into adults who pursue meaningful work, leadership, service, faith, entrepreneurship, and community contribution.

Even with incomplete tracking data, a significant portion of students are actively engaged in education, employment, entrepreneurship, leadership, ministry, or continued service to FSLC.



Strong National Museum of Play Juneteenth Partnership

Freedom Scholars Learning Center is excited to share that our Black History exhibits will be part of an upcoming Juneteenth event through a partnership with The Strong National Museum of Play.

The Strong is helping promote FSLC's participation on its website, and this year, our scholars will have the opportunity to present their Black History projects as part of the event.

This is a meaningful opportunity for scholar work to reach a wider community audience. Our scholars have been researching leaders of color connected to immigration rights, policy, advocacy, and history. Presenting this work during a Juneteenth celebration gives scholars a chance to connect Black history, civic learning, and public voice in a powerful way.

We are proud of our scholars and grateful for community partners who make space for young people to be seen, heard, and celebrated.

Memorial Day Parade

Freedom Scholars Learning Center was proud to be represented at this year's Memorial Day Parade, where Kelvin Sanchez Orona served as one of the announcers.

Kelvin attended in representation of FSLC and helped support a community event rooted in remembrance, service, and civic connection. The moment also reflected a growing relationship with the Veterans Executive Council.

We are grateful for opportunities that allow FSLC to show up in the wider Rochester community, build meaningful connections, and continue representing our mission beyond the walls of our program.





New Fundraising Coaching:

Freedom Scholars Learning Center is continuing to strengthen our fundraising work through Bonterra and ESL support.

This month, FSLC was connected with a new fundraising coach, Drew Glover, who will help our team build stronger donor engagement and long-term fundraising systems.

This support helps strengthen the foundation behind our programs so we can continue serving scholars and families with consistency, care, and accountability.



Preparing for CDF Freedom Schools National Training

FSLC staff are preparing to attend the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools National Training from June 2 to June 7, 2026.

This year's training includes time at Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, and the Knoxville Convention Center. Staff will participate in team-building, historical learning connected to movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, and preparation for delivering the Integrated Reading Curriculum.

National Training is one of the most important preparation experiences for Freedom School staff. It helps equip leaders to create joyful, culturally grounded, literacy-rich learning environments for scholars.