



**FREEDOM
SCHOLARS**
LEARNING CENTER

NEWS LET TER

**Summer
2026**

A Summer of Literacy, Leadership, and Community



This summer, Freedom Scholars Learning Center welcomed 60 scholars for six weeks of literacy, cultural learning, leadership development, family engagement, and joyful exploration.

Through the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools model, scholars participated in daily literacy instruction, culturally reflective learning, outdoor activities, STEM experiences, field trips, Read Alouds, family workshops, and social action. The summer program was designed to help scholars strengthen academic skills while building confidence, creativity, and a deeper connection to their communities.

From Harambee each morning through afternoon enrichment and special experiences, scholars were surrounded by opportunities to read, ask questions, explore, collaborate, and lead.

This summer was about more than keeping scholars engaged while school was out. It was about creating a space where young people felt seen, challenged, supported, and reminded that there is **Something Inside So Strong**.

SOMETHING INSIDE SO STRONG

Literacy & Learning Highlights

Word RICH: Targeted Literacy Support

Through **Word RICH, Reading Intervention through Cultural Heritage**, scholars received targeted literacy support grounded in the Science of Reading and centered on culturally meaningful learning.

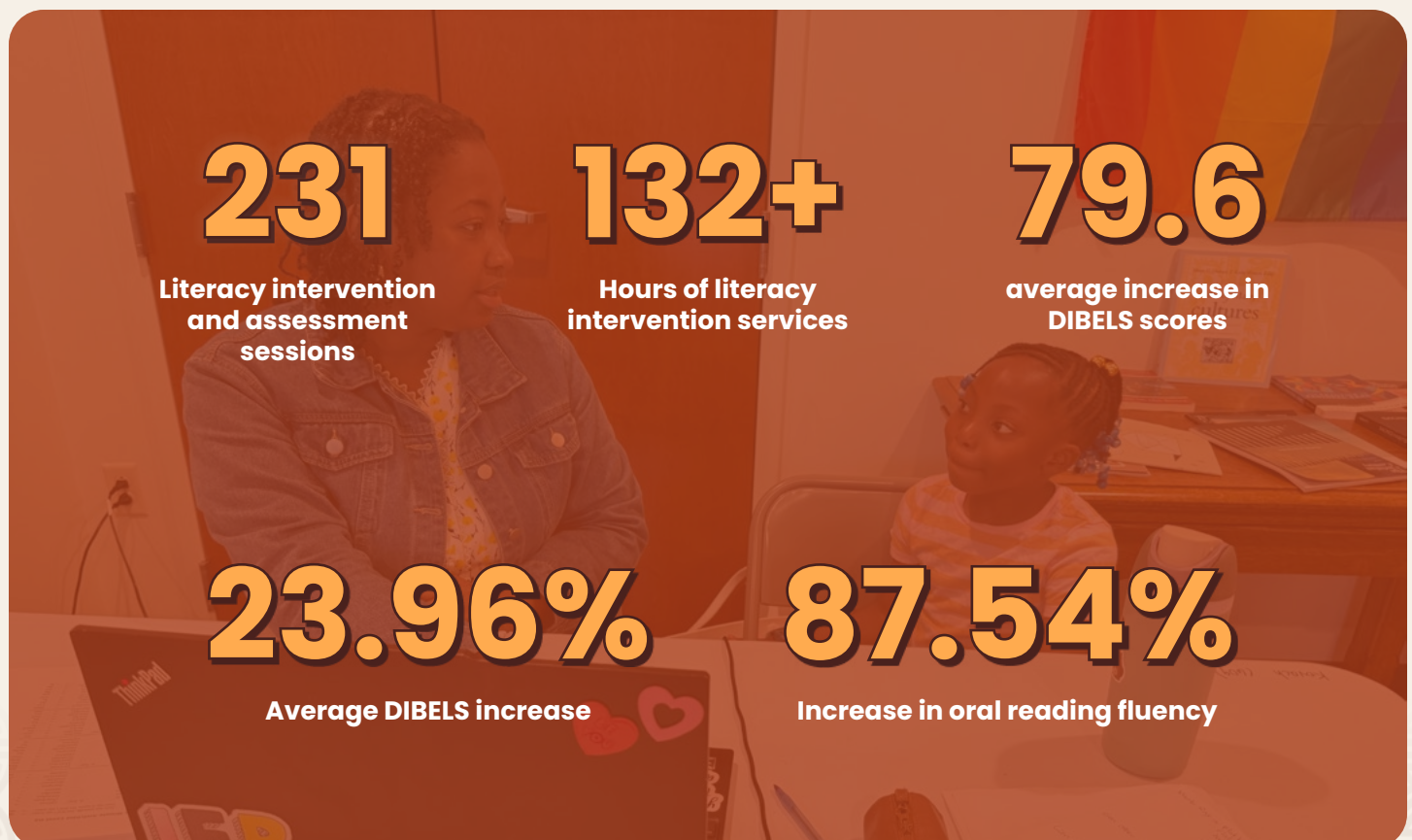
During the summer, the Word RICH team provided **231 intervention and assessment sessions**, including one-on-one and one-to-two Boost sessions and support from **Roberts Wesleyan** virtual tutors. Altogether, scholars received **more than 132 hours of literacy intervention services**.

The summer finale data reported encouraging literacy growth:

- ♦ **79.6**-point average increase in DIBELS scores
- ♦ **23.96%** average DIBELS increase
- ♦ **87.54%** increase in oral reading fluency for scholars in Grades 1–6

Level 2 scholars also participated in the **DEAR 2.0 Fluency Protocol**, which emphasized reading aloud, identifying the main idea, and building background knowledge before engaging more deeply with a text.

These summer results build on FSLC's ongoing commitment to using intentional assessment, targeted intervention, and culturally responsive literacy experiences to help scholars grow as readers.





Building Reading Habits with iReadify

Throughout the summer, scholars used iReadify to explore a wide range of digital books and continue building independent reading habits both during and beyond the program day.

Scholars engaged with stories centered on Black history, identity, friendship, STEM, social-emotional learning, and cultures from around the world. Titles explored included books about the Tuskegee Airmen, Miriam Makeba, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells, self-confidence, kindness, family, and more.

The summer reading reports also highlighted scholars who showed especially strong engagement with the platform, with some scholars exploring as many as **25 books**. iReadify's reports also showed scholars returning to the platform outside of program hours, extending opportunities for reading into evenings and weekends.

Together with the Integrated Reading Curriculum, Word RICH, library partnerships, and books scholars could take home, iReadify gave our scholars another way to discover stories that reflect their identities, expand their interests, and keep reading throughout the summer.

Sully Branch Library Summer Reading Program

Our partnership with the Sully Branch Library helped extend reading beyond the walls of FSLC.

Scholars enrolled in the library's summer reading program and used the reading logs they were already completing at FSLC to document their progress. Their participation also created opportunities to earn prizes, including entries for experiences such as Seabreeze and Seneca Park Zoo tickets.

This collaboration reinforced an important message: reading does not end when the program day is over. Libraries, books, and learning belong to our scholars all year long.



Growing Home Libraries with Lisa Libraries

Through a partnership with Lisa Libraries, **282 books were donated** for our scholars.

Scholars selected books that reflected their interests and took them home to build their personal libraries. Each book creates another opportunity to read independently, share stories with family, and continue learning beyond the summer program.

SOMETHING NEW

Science, Technology & Discovery

Get Real Science: From Environmental Investigation to Community Action

Through Get Real Science, scholars became environmental investigators as they explored a central question: How do tiny pieces of plastic move through the environment and into living systems—and what can communities do about it?

The experience began at Charlotte Beach, where scholars worked in teams to collect and carefully document sand samples from six locations along the Lake Ontario shoreline. They marked sampling areas, labeled and mapped each sample, and learned why scientists must preserve the context of where evidence comes from before making comparisons.



Back at camp, scholars used sieves, salt water, filtration, and microscopes to investigate how size, density, air, and water can affect the movement of small particles. They also examined other possible pathways for pollution—including litter and tire wear—and collected field data from the surrounding neighborhood. During one activity, scholars documented 51 litter observations along roughly 405 meters, using measurement and mathematics to think about pollution patterns in their community.

Scholars also investigated how tiny particles might interact with living systems. After discussing scientific responsibility, safety, and choice, teams collected small tissue samples from a fish for later analysis. The activity emphasized an important part of real science: evidence must be tested before conclusions are made.



As the week progressed, scholars moved from scientific investigation to questions of responsibility, power, and action. They examined how infrastructure, runoff, product design, and community decisions can influence environmental systems. During a policy role-play, scholars acted as community stakeholders, considered strategies such as capturing runoff, producer responsibility, and community education, then used evidence to make claims, challenge one another, and recommend solutions.

The camp concluded by connecting science with advocacy. Scholars created wearable art from reused materials to communicate their own environmental concerns, stories, and hopes.

Get Real Science gave scholars more than an introduction to environmental science. It gave them the opportunity to collect evidence, question assumptions, revise their thinking, debate solutions, and see themselves as scientists and community advocates.

SOMETHING NEW

ROC AI: Building AI Literacy Through Reading, Creativity & Problem-Solving

For the fourth year, FSLC partnered with the University of Rochester ROC AI team to give scholars hands-on opportunities to explore artificial intelligence while connecting technology to literacy, creativity, and real-world problem-solving.

Level 2 scholars used an interactive Book Reading Companion alongside selected texts. Rather than simply giving scholars answers, the AI agent posed questions that encouraged them to explain their thinking, reflect on ideas from the books, and make deeper connections to what they were reading.

Level 3 scholars explored both AI literacy and financial literacy through a simulated movie-rental business. Over several days, they learned how recommendation systems work—moving from manual and rule-based recommendations to content-based recommendations and



collaborative filtering. Scholars tested ways to improve the accuracy of recommendations and even used AI tools to develop creative movie concepts and posters.

Together, these experiences gave scholars an opportunity not just to use artificial intelligence, but to begin understanding how AI makes decisions, how people can evaluate those decisions, and how technology can be used thoughtfully and creatively.

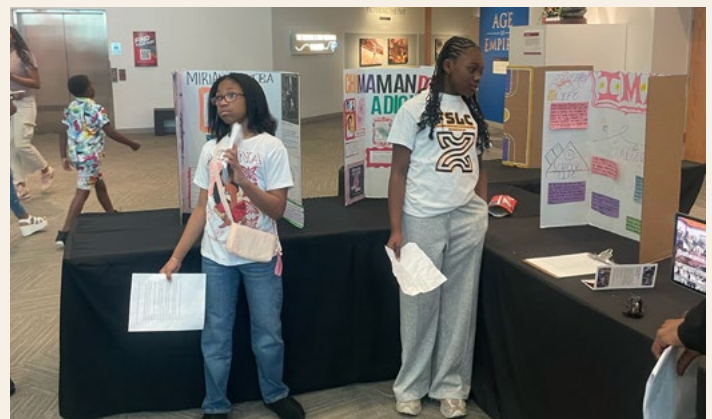
Sharing Black History at The Museum of Play

As part of Rochester's Juneteenth celebration at The Strong National Museum of Play, Freedom Scholars shared Black history presentations they had researched and developed.

Our scholars entered the space as presenters, educators, and young historians.

Through their work, they lifted up Black stories, achievements, leadership, and cultural contributions while practicing research, writing, public speaking, and confidence.

Moments like this reflect the heart of FSLC's cultural pedagogy: scholars do not only learn history. They develop the knowledge and voice to carry it forward.



Field Trips & Summer Experiences

Learning Beyond the Classroom

This summer, scholars explored Rochester and beyond through experiences that connected learning, play, science, nature, and community.



Seneca Park Zoo

Scholars explored animal life, habitats, conservation, and the importance of protecting ecosystems.



Rochester Museum & Science Center

At RMSC, scholars engaged with interactive exhibits that encouraged curiosity, experimentation, and hands-on discovery.



Ice Cream Plus

Our visit to Ice Cream Plus gave scholars a joyful opportunity to spend time together, celebrate the summer, and build relationships outside the classroom.



Buffalo Bills Training Camp Experience

Thanks to the generosity of Wegmans, our Level 2 and Level 3 scholars attended a special Buffalo Bills Training Camp experience.

Scholars participated in football skills and drills, practiced punting, passing, and kicking, spent time on the field, received autographs, and enjoyed food and fellowship.

For many scholars, this was a new and memorable experience that combined movement, teamwork, excitement, and exposure to a professional sports environment.

We are deeply grateful to Wegmans for making this opportunity possible.

Family Engagement

Summer Family Workshops

Throughout the summer, families gathered for six workshops offering practical tools, community knowledge, and meaningful conversation.



Deep Dig and Family Engagement

Lawrence Forte III encouraged families to remain actively involved in their children's growth while helping young people recognize their stories, strengths, and goals.



Rhythms of Math: Drumming, Literacy, and Learning

Henry Padrón used African-Caribbean percussion to show how rhythm can support memorization, comprehension, phonemic awareness, and learning at home.



Growing Together: Caring for Youth Mental Health

Through a Community Café, families discussed youth mental health, emotional wellness, and how caregivers and communities can help young people feel heard and supported.



Understanding the Hidden Trauma of Poverty

Dr. Sheterra Bouie explored the often-unseen emotional effects of poverty and encouraged greater understanding and compassion for families navigating chronic stress and limited resources.



Literacy Resources in Our Community

Lauren Bigley introduced families to local programs, libraries, and community resources that can support children's reading and learning.



Financial Education for Families

Romanda Gibson-Stevenson shared practical information about planning, saving, everyday financial decisions, and building stronger financial habits.



Read Aloud Guests

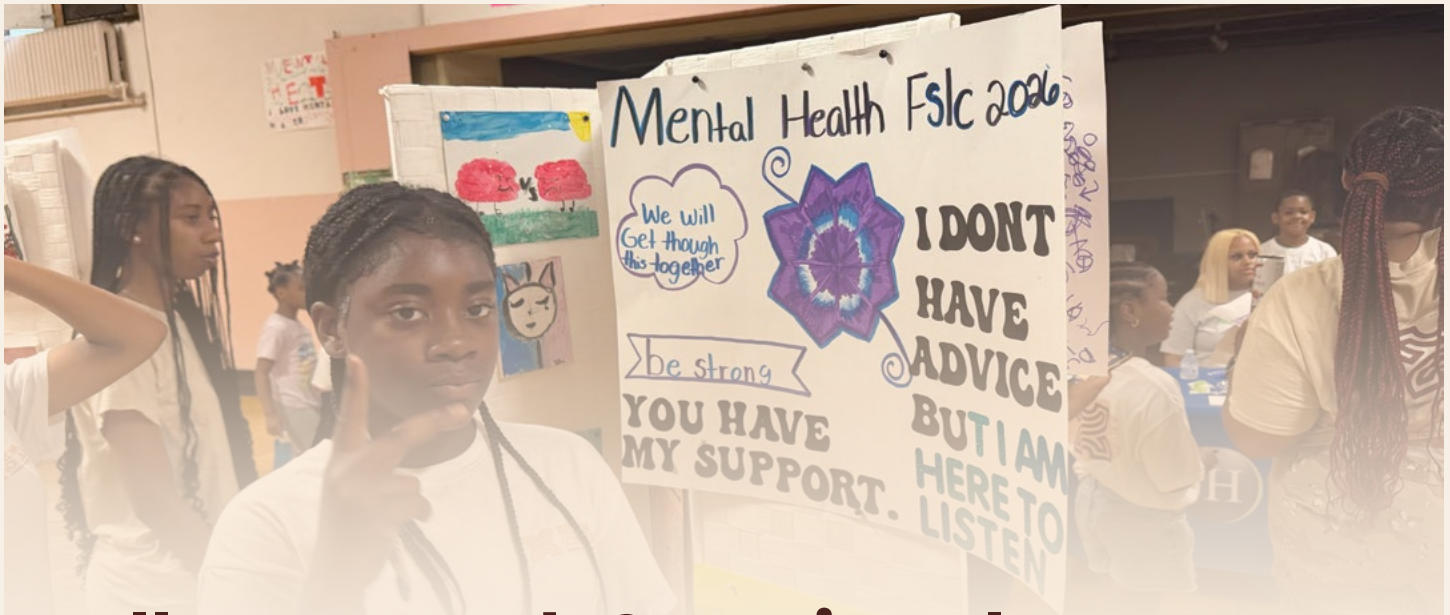
Throughout the summer, community members joined us during Harambee as Read Aloud guests.

These guests represented education, health, business, libraries, advocacy, community development, and other professional fields. Their presence showed scholars that reading connects to every career, every community, and every pathway forward.

We extend our gratitude to:

Latoya Sneed	Carla Stough Huffman	Colin Harris
Wade Norwood	Elisabeth Stabel	Laura Sugarwala
Paola Viera	Shane Wiegand	Kareem Hayes
Adrian Jimenez	Mary Lupien	April Luehmann
Melissa Sturge-Apple	Madeleine Obstarczyk	Shannon Scott
Lillian Horne	Erica Friedman Coburn	Romanda Gibson- Stevenson
Nina Shaw	Rachel DeVona	Anne Marie White

Each guest brought their own voice, experience, and encouragement into our learning space. We are thankful for everyone who showed our scholars that their stories, ideas, and futures matter.



Wellness Week & National Day of Social Action

The WELLness Within: Mind, Voice & Community

This summer, FSLC held its inaugural Youth Mental Health Wellness Week, creating space for scholars to explore emotional wellness, self-expression, movement, creativity, and community care.

Programming included youth mental health conversations, art activities, poetry and spoken word, yoga and movement, Read Aloud guests, scholar-created posters, music, performances, community resources, and family engagement.

The week centered an important message: young people deserve the language, support, and safe spaces needed to understand their emotions and care for their mental health.

As part of Wellness Week, FSLC hosted its National Day of Social Action, centered on youth mental health awareness.

Scholars used writing, visual art, performance, digital media, and public speaking to communicate what mental wellness means to them and what young people need from families, schools, and communities.

The event brought scholars, caregivers, community organizations, volunteers, and guests together around a shared commitment to listening to and supporting youth.

Our scholars did not simply participate in a conversation created by adults. They helped lead it.



SOMETHING INSIDE

Summer Finale

Celebrating Growth, Creativity & Leadership

Our summer program concluded with finale presentations that allowed scholars and Servant Leaders to share what they had learned and created.

Presentations included digital projects, book reflections, infographics, videos, skits, dramatic scenes, scholar presentations, and social action work.

The finale gave families and guests a chance to witness the curiosity, confidence, creativity, and growth that developed throughout the summer.

Every project told part of the story of what happens when scholars are given meaningful books, caring adults, challenging experiences, and room to lead.

Servant Leader Spotlight

Our Servant Leaders played an essential role in creating a safe, joyful, and academically strong summer program.

They supported literacy instruction, guided scholar projects, facilitated Harambee, helped lead activities, and modeled intergenerational leadership.

We are proud to celebrate five Servant Leaders continuing their education:

Bishop Andrews — Monroe Community College

Jonah Staples — University of Rochester

Ke'Arie Monson — Genesee Community College

Kemarii Monson — Monroe Community College

Tajmir Mullins — Utica University

Janiyah Whitfield — Monroe Community College

Their next steps reflect the leadership, commitment, and potential they shared with our scholars throughout the summer. We are proud of each of them and excited to see where their journeys lead.

Looking Ahead

As summer comes to a close, FSLC remains committed to creating transformational learning spaces where scholars can grow in literacy, leadership, confidence, and community.

Thank you to every scholar, family, Servant Leader, volunteer, guest, funder, and community partner who made this summer possible.

Support Freedom Scholars Learning Center

Your support helps us continue providing literacy intervention, books, field trips, youth employment, family engagement, and meaningful learning experiences throughout the year.