



**FREEDOM
SCHOLARS**
LEARNING CENTER

NEWS LET TER

**January
2026**

Policy & Advocacy Updates

Youth Justice Day in Albany

In January, Freedom Scholars Learning Center brought 10 families to Youth Justice Day in Albany, organized by the Children's Defense Fund and Freedom Schools partners from across New York State.

With approximately 500 people gathered at the Capitol, families, youth, and community partners lifted up priorities for the 2026 New York State budget, including:

- ♦ Youth Justice Innovation Fund
- ♦ Right to Remain Silent policy
- ♦ Raise the Age policy

We are proud that our families showed up as advocates and leaders, ensuring youth and caregiver voices remain central in statewide justice reform conversations.



Letters to U.S. Senators

Freedom Scholars submitted letters to:

- ♦ Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
- ♦ Senator Chuck Schumer

These letters expressed concern about federal actions impacting the U.S. Department of Education and reinforced the need for:

- ♦ Strong, equitable public education
- ♦ Adequate funding for students and families who have been historically marginalized

Support for Black Immigrants

Freedom Scholars signed on to a national *"Black letter"* supporting Black immigrants and opposing harmful ICE practices. This reflects our ongoing commitment to:

- ♦ Racial justice
- ♦ Immigrant justice
- ♦ Safe and welcoming communities for all children and families

Public Service Announcement: Child Care Scrutiny

Families and providers in New York, Ohio, Minnesota, California, and Illinois have experienced heightened scrutiny of child care programs.

Drawing from information shared by the Children's Defense Fund, Freedom Scholars:

- ♦ Alerted families to the current climate and investigations
- ♦ Encouraged families to stay informed and maintain documentation
- ♦ Emphasized understanding rights and responsibilities related to child care benefits

This is a public service announcement, shared to keep our community aware and prepared.

Organizational Growth & Program Highlights

STEM Next Opportunity Fund & Tech & Career Community of Practice

Freedom Scholars joined a national STEM initiative that expands our tech and career programming:

STEM Next Opportunity Fund (STEM Next) and the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance's Afterschool Coaching Reflective Educators in STEM (ACRES) program sponsors the Tech & Career Community of Practice.

Through this opportunity:

- ♦ Jeremy, Kelvin, and selected staff receive coaching and professional development focused on high-quality STEM learning in afterschool settings.
- ♦ Apple is providing iPads for Jeremy, Kelvin, participating staff, and scholars, an estimated 12–15 iPads total.
- ♦ Youth will use these iPads in STEM projects and tech-focused activities led by our trained staff.

Collaboration with CDF Freedom School Syracuse ("Freedom Cuse")

We launched a new partnership with Children's Defense Fund Freedom School Syracuse (also known as Freedom Cuse), led by Executive Director Alonzo Graham.

Together, we are:

- ♦ Sharing practices and strengthening connections across sites
- ♦ Co-developing opportunities for children and families
- ♦ Expanding literacy and enrichment programming across Western New York



CDF Parent Focus Groups on Public Benefits

Freedom Scholars parents participated in focus groups organized by the Children's Defense Fund on public benefits and social programs, led by Juan Diaz.

These sessions:

- ♦ Gathered parent perspectives on access to and experiences with public benefits
- ♦ Will help inform advocacy and program design that better serves families

Participating parents received stipends for their time and expertise, recognizing the value of lived experience and caregiver leadership.



Prince Street Building: Lease Progress

We advanced a major step toward our long-term home at 31 Prince Street:

- ♦ Moved from a Letter of Intent (LOI) to active lease agreement negotiations
- ♦ Working through terms for a 3–5 year lease

This progress brings us closer to operating in a dedicated space designed for children’s literacy, enrichment, and family programming, rather than relying on shared back rooms in borrowed facilities.



New Website Launch

The Freedom Scholars Learning Center website is now officially live.

The site makes it easier to:

- ♦ Learn about our programs
- ♦ Understand our mission and story
- ♦ Stay connected as a family, partner, or supporter

Team member Faith is capturing screenshots and images to share on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn to help more families and partners find us, explore our work, and stay engaged.

Family to Family Workshops

Our Family to Family Workshop Series was finalized in January and is launching in February.

This series is designed to:

- ♦ Highlight the expertise of parents and community members
- ♦ Share practical tools and encouragement for families
- ♦ Strengthen community connection around supporting children and youth

Workshops will be:

- ♦ Livestreamed on Thursdays on Facebook
- ♦ Recorded and later posted to YouTube
- ♦ Supported with a small gift card as a thank-you to each featured guest

Reporting & Accountability

Mid-Year Report Completed

At the mid-year mark, Freedom Scholars Learning Center’s Seed Sowers & Storytellers program is showing strong growth in attendance, engagement, and literacy outcomes, while deepening partnerships and strengthening internal systems to better serve scholars and families.

Highlights:

- ♦ 81% retention rate across FSLC programs, with full enrollment of 30 scholars
- ♦ Attendance up 15% compared to last year, with a current median rate of 75%
- ♦ Scholars showed exceptional literacy gains, including:
 - ♦ 93% increase in reading fluency
 - ♦ 70% growth in decoding skills
 - ♦ 61% increase in word reading ability
- ♦ Over 170 one-to-one reading interventions delivered during the fall/winter cycle

SOMETHING NEW IS BEING BUILT

IRC Spotlight

Books We Read in January

This month's Integrated Reading Curriculum selections invited scholars to explore community care, environmental stewardship, access to books, and the power of growing together.

Jayden's Impossible Garden

Jayden is determined to grow something beautiful, even when the odds feel stacked against him. Through patience, creativity, and support from others, he learns that what feels impossible can start with one small step.

Themes: perseverance, nature, problem-solving, hope.

Nia and the New Free Library

Nia discovers the joy and possibility that comes when books are made accessible to everyone. A new free library becomes more than a box of books. It becomes a symbol of community sharing and imagination.

Themes: access to education, community care, joy of reading.

Saturdays at Harlem Grown

This story follows the rhythms of a community garden, where young people learn, plant, and build something together. It highlights how food, nature, and teamwork can grow confidence and connection.

Themes: community building, environmental stewardship, teamwork, belonging.

Included

A story that centers what it means to be fully seen and welcomed. Scholars reflected on how communities make space for everyone, and how belonging is created through everyday choices and kindness.

Themes: inclusion, empathy, respect, community.

Looking Ahead

The Freedom Scholars Learning Center enables children and families from communities under pressure to build and secure academic, social, cultural, economic, and environmental literacies to support pathways for school and life success.

