



Department of
Youth Services

Message from DYS Director Harvey Reed

Freedom Schools: A Year Later

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Youth D has much enthusiasm in his voice when he talks about the Freedom Schools program.

"It's fun. It's motivating. It's positive," said the 18-year-old youth from the Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility (ChJCF)

Since the program was launched at DYS in July 2014, a total of 129 youth have completed the six-week, voluntary program.

Many youth are hesitant at first to attend a Freedom Schools session, but by the last day they are inquiring about the dates of the next session. Of the four sessions offered at ChJCF during the last year, 19-year-old Youth R has participated in three.

He persuades other youth to participate, too. "I tell them that it will be a little uncomfortable at first, but after a couple of weeks, it will be another family," he said. Youth R explains that the uncomfortable part is during Harambee when youth sing and dance to kick-off each day of Freedom Schools. Harambee is a Swahili word that means "let's pull together." During the activity, the group sings, talks about aspirations and listen to guests read out loud.

"Freedom Schools allows youth to increase their reading levels by utilizing cheers, chants and team building exercises to create a high energy learning environment," said Cornelius Lawrence, Site Coordinator of Freedom Schools at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility (CJCF).



DYS launched Freedom Schools last year in partnership with the Children's Defense Fund to enhance existing educational services. The goal is simple: foster a love of reading. Ohio is the first juvenile justice system to offer the program statewide.

While youth participation is voluntary, there is an expectation that they will read six books during each Freedom Schools session.

Of the 18 books Youth R has read, one in particular stuck in his mind called the *Battle of Jericho*. "From this book, I learned that even though something is not your responsibility, sometimes you need to step in and help someone."

For Youth J, *Think Big* was the book offering him inspiration. Author Ben Carson describes his transformation from his difficult childhood to his rise as a top pediatric neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins University. "That really inspired me because he came from a rough neighborhood," he said. Youth J has participated in two Freedom Schools sessions.

For Youth D, Freedom Schools has been an "eye opener." His favorite book was *Enrique's Journey* where he learned about perseverance and determination.

Jennifer Sanders, Superintendent of Buckeye United Schools, said there has been a slight uptick in reading scores. "Any time a youth picks up a book and reads, there is a lot of value in that."

Sanders points out that the biggest impact of the Freedom Schools program is in the area of youth behavior. "We have seen a significant increase in positive behavior, while acts of violence have dropped 50-60%," she said.

Youth D, who will be released from DYS in a few weeks, has nothing but praise for the Freedom Schools program. "I'm glad DYS is offering it," he said. He is interested in working as a Freedom Schools counselor so he can help others.

"I have witnessed Freedom Schools scholars take pride in the leadership that participation in this program offers and the excitement they experience when demonstrating it for others. It is truly beneficial for our young men during the course of their life journey," said Dr. Melissa Dunphy, Deputy Superintendent of Programs at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility.