

**Freedom School Partners  
Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program  
Evaluation Report**

Submitted  
by



Written by

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**Freedom School Partners Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program  
Summer 2019 Evaluation Report**

**OVERVIEW**

For 10 of the past 11 years, the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte has conducted program evaluations for the Freedom School Partners’ Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® programs in Charlotte, N.C. The focus of these evaluations has been on reading outcomes of Scholars (youth) in the program and, more recently to include data on Scholar and Servant Leader Interns (SLI) experiences. We report here on the reading outcomes for Level I, Level II and Level III Scholars in 10 of the 18 Charlotte Freedom School program sites during the summer of 2019 using the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory* (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013). Additionally, we provide a snapshot of the previous year’s outcomes and a review of published research related to reading and summer learning loss.

**Freedom School Partners’ CDF Freedom Schools Program**

The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) is a private, nonprofit child advocacy organization that was founded in 1973 to champion the rights of all children, especially those living in poverty. Based in Washington, DC, CDF grew out of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Marian Wright Edelman, founder and former president of CDF. The Children’s Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission states that it seeks “to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.”<sup>1</sup> CDF describes Freedom School as a program that “seeks to build strong, literate, and empowered children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation and world today.” Freedom School is a summer program with a mission of empowerment that includes a significant focus on literacy.

Created by the Children’s Defense Fund, the Freedom Schools program engages children in grades K-12<sup>2</sup> in a six-week summer program designed to prevent the “learning loss” that students (known as Scholars in the program) typically experience over the months when school is not in session. The Freedom Schools program also aims to have a positive impact on children’s character development, leadership, and community involvement. The CDF Freedom Schools program provides enrichment with the stated goals of “helping children fall in love with reading, increase[ing] their self-esteem, and generate[ing] more positive attitudes toward

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the Children’s Defense Fund and its programs is available at the CDF website: <http://www.childrendefense.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Grade and age ranges vary by Freedom School site. Some programs serve children across the K-12 span while others focus on K-5 or K-8.

learning.” CDF reports that more than 150,000 children in grades K-12 have participated in Freedom Schools programs since its inception in 1995. Data from CDF was not available for Summer 2019 Freedom School programs nationally at the time of this report, but in 2018, there were 11,830 Scholars in Freedom School programs in 87 cities and 28 states including Washington D.C. The Scholars are grouped by grade levels with Level I Scholars having just completed Kindergarten, first, or second grade. Level II Scholars come from grades three through five and Level III Scholars from grades six through eight. There is a Level IV high school program at some sites nationally including some Charlotte sites but that group was not included in this evaluation.

The Freedom Schools programs provide a literature based reading program called the Integrated Reading Curriculum or IRC. About 80 books are on the IRC’s booklist and these books feature the work of many well-known authors. CDF has developed six weeks of lesson plans for approximately half of the books to help staff and Scholars reflect on the themes *I Can Make a Difference in: My Self, My Family, My Community, My Country, and My World with Hope, Education, and Action*. The remaining titles are used to create on-site libraries of books for use during silent sustained reading and read-alouds, as well as for research on history and community service projects. Servant Leader Interns are recruited and provided with training that includes how to implement the Integrated Reading Curriculum. The majority of Interns are college-age students.

In Charlotte, CDF Freedom Schools are hosted by Freedom School Partners (FSP), a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1999 that is dedicated to serving children and families living in poverty. FSP’s mission is to “promote the long-term success of children by preventing summer learning loss through igniting a passion for reading and inspiring a love of learning.” FSP began hosting Freedom Schools programs in 2004 at one location serving 100 scholars. In 2019, Freedom Schools served 18 sites and more than 1,300 Scholars. FSP partners with community groups, faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, and corporations, which provide volunteer and financial support.

Freedom School sites in Charlotte range in size from approximately 50 to 100 scholars and operate five days a week, from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Transportation is provided, and Scholars are served breakfast, lunch and a snack. Freedom Schools programs are offered at no charge to participating families beyond a \$40 per family enrollment fee. Parents are asked to attend parent meetings and volunteer with the program.

A typical day in a Freedom School program follows a pattern. After breakfast, the Scholars, site coordinator, and Interns come together for Harambee, a Kiswahili word for “let’s pull together.” Harambee is a time of celebration and affirmation akin to a daily pep-rally that includes songs, chants, and a read-aloud of a short book by a community member. Integrated

Reading Curriculum, or IRC, follows Harambee. During IRC, students go to their classrooms with their Intern for a 2-1/2 hour period of literacy activities built around the reading of culturally-diverse books. The program has a 1:10 Intern to Scholar ratio, and Scholars and Interns read, discuss, and engage in activities drawn from the books. Following IRC, Scholars participate in D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) time, a daily period of silent reading where Scholars are able to self-select books. Following IRC, Scholars eat lunch and engage in afternoon enrichment activities. The enrichment activities vary by site but include a mix of traditional summer activities such as swimming and sports but also yoga, field trips to museums and other local sites, cooking and hands-on projects, and co-curricular activities that include an academic focus.

## Evaluation History

As has been noted, this research builds on research conducted over a 10-year period including a pilot evaluation conducted at two Freedom School sites during the summer of 2009. The evaluation was extended to additional sites after 2009 in order to provide a larger sample size to provide statistical significance in the findings. Ten or more sites have been included in the evaluation since 2010. In 2018, Level I Scholars were administered a different assessment by FSP, so data for that group was not included in the 2018 evaluation report.

Two reading assessment measures have been used to capture pre/post data in these evaluations. The *Basic Reading Inventory* (BRI) 9<sup>th</sup> Edition (2008) and 10<sup>th</sup> Edition (2010) Form A and B were used between 2009 and 2015<sup>3</sup>. In 2016, the BRI was used at 14 sites while the *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory* or ESRI (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013) was piloted at four sites. Following a review of results along with an analysis of the implementation from the BRI and ESRI in 2016, the ESRI was chosen as the assessment tool for 2017, 2018 and again in 2019.

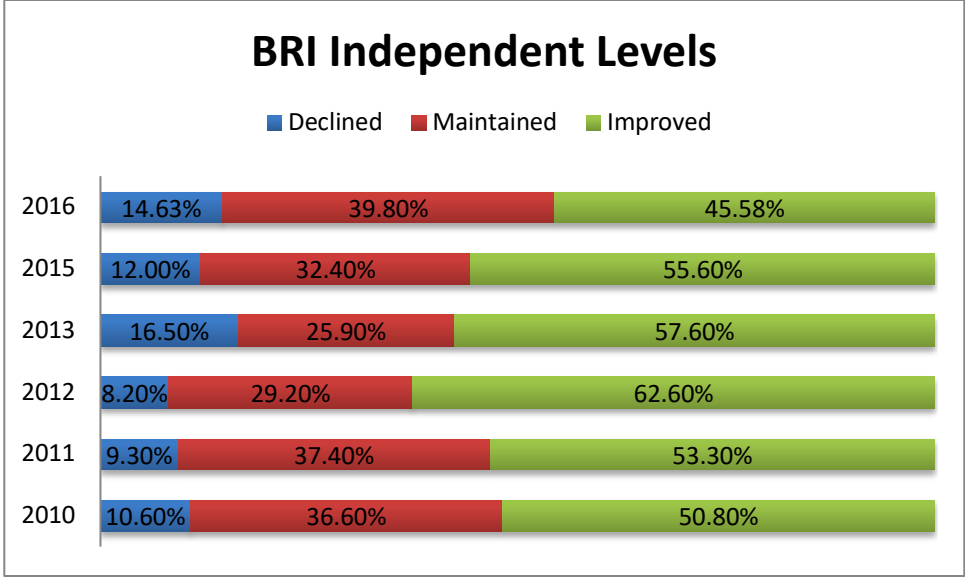
While there has been some difference between the results of the BRI and ESRI, the findings across all evaluation years have remained relatively consistent. Between 80% and 90% of Freedom School Scholars increased or maintained their reading level as measured by the BRI and the ESRI across two measures of reading—the Independent Level (the level at which a child can read on their own) and the Frustration Level (the level at which a child cannot read successfully even with support). Figure 1 provides information about the percentages of Scholars who showed losses, maintained, or showed gains in reading at the Independent Level using the BRI in the years that reading inventory was used. Figure 2 provides this information

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<sup>3</sup> Form A and B did not change from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> editions of the *Basic Reading Inventory* so the assessments used between 2009 and 2015 were consistent.

for the ESRI data. Figure 3 and Figure 4 are snapshots of Frustration Level reading for the BRI and ESRI, respectively.

**Figure 1.** 2010-2016 Independent Level Results from the *Basic Reading Inventory*



**Figure 2.** 2016-2018 Independent Level Results from the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory*

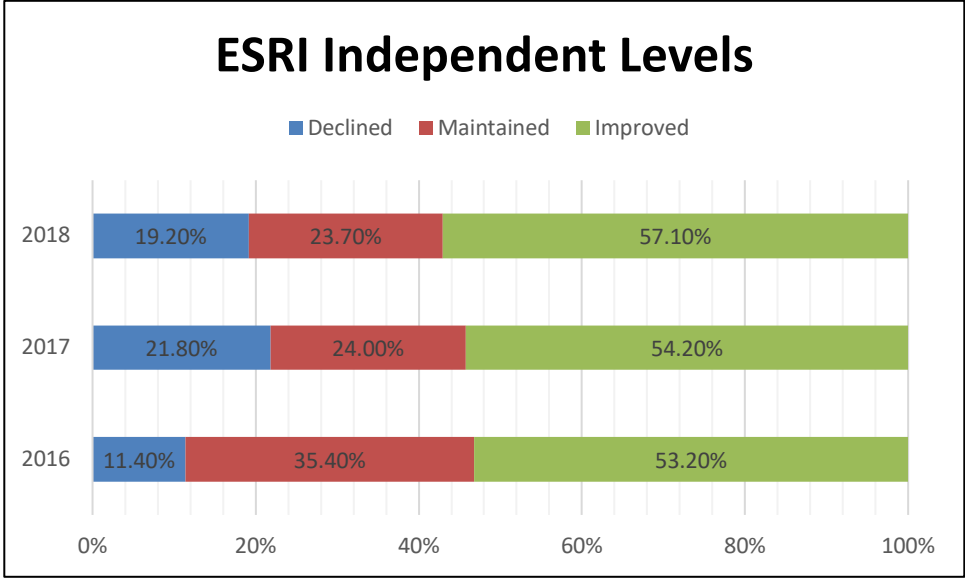
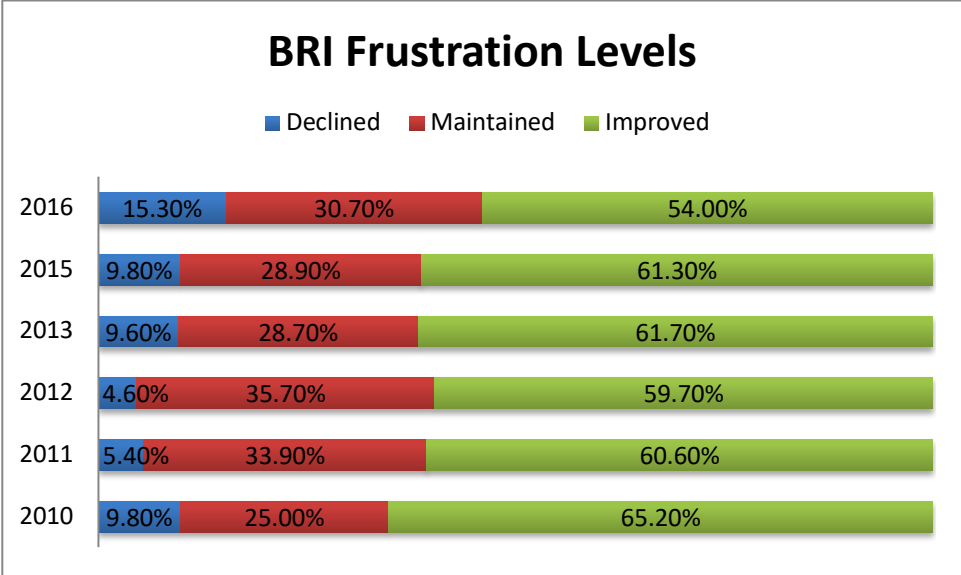


Figure 1 and Figure 2 suggest that patterns of change in reading from pre- to post-test are similar across years and from the BRI to ESRI in reading proficiency at the Independent Level.

**Figure 3.** 2010-2016 Frustration Level Results from the *Basic Reading Inventory*



**Figure 4.** 2016-2018 Frustration Level Results from the *Ekwall-Shanker Reading Inventory*

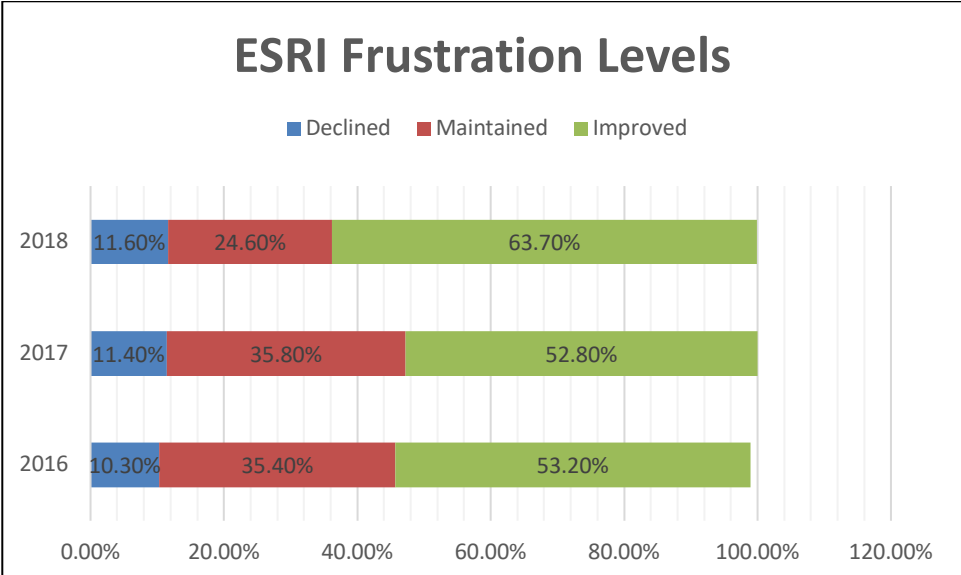


Figure 3 and Figure 4 show similar distributions of change from losses to gains across the years and from the BRI to the ESRI. We also note that there is a pattern showing a greater degree of gain in Frustration Levels, on average, than in Independent Levels.

Important data were gathered in 2010 regarding Scholars' attitudes towards the reading component of Freedom Schools with the overwhelming majority demonstrating positive attitudes towards the program (as determined in an analysis of Scholar interviews). The

Scholars' comments pointed to the engaging nature of the books and activities that are part of the IRC and to the role of the Servant Leader Interns as positive aspects of the program.

Below is an overview of the research objectives and design, followed by findings and a discussion of results. We have created an Appendix section and have moved the review of related research about summer learning loss and a rationale for the use of informal reading inventories (IRIs) to the end of the report.

## **OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **History**

Research documenting reading outcomes for Freedom School Scholars goes back to 2005 with an evaluation of the program by the Kansas City Freedom School Initiative, which demonstrated a significant improvement in reading abilities for Freedom School Scholars. UNC Charlotte was the first to evaluate outcomes for participating Scholars in Charlotte. In early 2009, Freedom School Partners approached the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institute for Social Capital, Inc. (ISC) to develop an outcome evaluation for the program. A pilot program evaluation was conducted at two Freedom Schools sites in summer 2009. Results from the pilot evaluation were promising. This pilot evaluation showed that of the 51 participants in grades two through five, 57% showed an increase in their reading levels as assessed in the *Basic Reading Inventory*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition (Johns, 2008). Twenty-nine percent maintained their reading performance and just under 14% showed some decline. The promising pilot evaluation results led to the continuation of program evaluation.

In 2010, Freedom School Partners contracted with the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte to implement an outcome evaluation project to examine the effect of Freedom Schools on children participating at all 10 FSP Freedom Schools sites. The program evaluation sought to assess the extent to which the CDF Freedom Schools program met the following objectives for the K-8 Scholars enrolled:

- To increase children's reading performances
- To maintain or to increase children's reading levels from the end of the school year until the beginning of the following school year
- To increase children's "love" of reading

### **Present Evaluation – Summer 2019**

This year's evaluation continues with a pre/posttest format at 10 Freedom School sites in Charlotte using the ESRI to understand how participation in Freedom School affected the



reading performance of Scholars during the summer of 2019. As previously stated, the 2018 evaluation report included findings for Level II and Level III Scholars but not Level I Scholars. This year’s report includes an evaluation of Level I, Level II and Level III Scholars.

The research questions that guided the evaluation were adjusted accordingly. This evaluation was guided by the following questions:

- *Did Level I, Level II and Level III Freedom School Scholars show any change in their Independent and Frustration reading levels from pre- to posttest as measured by the Ekwall/Shanker Inventory (ESRI)?*
  - Specifically, did children exhibit a change in reading performance over time?
  - If there was a change, was the change from pretest to posttest statistically significant?
  - What proportion of Freedom School Scholars maintained or improved reading performance over time?
  - Did differences in performance over time differ by Scholar demographic characteristics? If so, how?

## METHODS

### Procedures

Because of the program’s structure, this evaluation used a quasi-experiment pretest-posttest design, with no control or comparison group. Scholars were enrolled by Freedom Schools Program staff at each site. At those sites, parents were asked to provide consent to allow their child/Scholar to participate in the evaluation. Sampling was stratified by level, gender, and ethnicity (see Table 1). A total of 781 scholars across 10 study sites were enrolled in summer 2019. Scholars were randomly selected based on the stratified sampling plan described above and were informed that their participation was voluntary. Those who agreed to participate provided verbal assent at the time of the assessment.

**Table 1.** Criteria for Stratification

Criteria			
Level	I (K-2)	II (3-5)	III (6-8)
Gender	Male Female	Male Female	Male Female
Ethnicity	African-American Hispanic Other	African-American Hispanic Other	African-American Hispanic Other

## Sample

Data collection was conducted from June 18, 2019 to July 18, 2019. The pretest was administered in June and the posttest was conducted in July. Of the 781 enrolled scholars, 551 (71%) were assessed at the start of the program (i.e., pretest). Due to absences ( $n = 183$ ), time constraints ( $n = 29$ ), and other factors outside the evaluator's control (e.g., child was not an English speaker;  $n = 17$ ), 229 (29%) were not assessed. Of those 551 Scholars assessed at pretest, 299 (54%) had complete pre- and posttest data. Lack of complete pre-post data was due largely ( $n = 133$ ) to Scholars' inability to achieve the basal level required to receive a pre-primer score or zero recode score on a test. Absences or withdrawal from the program also contributed to sample size reduction. Thus, this report is based on 299 Scholars with complete pre- and posttest data. Based on G\*Power analysis, 208 scholars are needed to detect a small effect (.20) at 80 power using an alpha level of .05. The final sample provides enough power to detect differences in the outcome measures.

Results from the Fisher's exact test indicated that there was a significant association between gender and complete test data, with females more likely to have completed both tests ( $p = .037$ ). There was also a significant association between previous program experience and test completion, with a higher proportion of those with previous experience completing both tests ( $p < .001$ ). According to the chi-square tests, Scholar grade and level were also significantly associated with complete test data ( $p < .001$ ), with those in higher grades and levels more likely.

## Measures

**Demographic information.** At enrollment, parents provided demographic information about the Scholar, including the age, grade, whether the child had repeated a grade, whether the child had previously participated in the program, and if so, the number of years. Parents also indicated whether the Scholar participated in the free lunch program, a proxy for family income.

**Reading Assessment.** The *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory* (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013) is an individually administered reading inventory with multiple measures used to assess reading. For this evaluation, the research team used Form A for the pretest and Form C for the posttest. These are equivalent measures used to assess students' oral reading. Form A and C include a Graded Word List (GWL), Graded Reading Passages, and Oral Reading Comprehension Questions that accompany each passage. The ESRI has a single GWL, the San Diego Quick Assessment (SDQA), that has lists of 10 words each. The single set of ESRI word lists are used for the pre- and posttest administration. The ESRI instructs assessors to start all students on the pre-primer (PP) lists of words and to have the student continue reading until he or she makes

three or more errors on any one list. Once a student makes three errors the GWL administration is stopped. The lowest list with three or more errors (where the administration was stopped) is the Frustration level. The Instructional level is the list with two errors, and the high level (list) with one error or less is scored Independent.

The Graded Reading Passages on the ESRI consist of short, leveled passages of text that are read aloud by the Scholar while the assessor documents reading accuracy by noting miscues. The passages on the ERSI go through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, one grade level beyond the BRI. Miscues include words skipped, words inserted, and words said incorrectly. The ESRI has assessors say any unknown words that a student cannot read after a five second pause. Scores are reported at the Independent, Instructional, and Frustration levels based on scales provided for each passage. Passages are a mix of expository and narrative forms with accompanying comprehension questions about the text. Scores for each passage are computed using a matrix that includes a dimension for the number of comprehension questions missed and number of word recognition errors. More weight is given to comprehension than word errors.

**Outcome variables.** Scores are reported at the Independent, Instructional, and Frustration levels (Shanker & Cockrum, 2013). The ESRI computes the Independent and Frustration levels using the same percentages as the BRI (Table 2). Scores on the ESRI are computed for each outcome range from pre-primer to ninth grade. The Independent and Frustration scores were used to address the evaluation objectives.

**Table 2.** Levels of Reading Assessed with the *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory*

Level	Characteristics
Independent (easy)	Comprehension (90%+) Word Recognition (99%+)
Frustration (too hard)	Comprehension (50%+) Word Recognition (90%+)

**Analyses Plan**

As noted previously, scores for each of the outcomes (Independent and Frustration) range from pre-primer to ninth grade. For analysis purposes, Scholars who performed at pre-primer or primer were assigned a score of zero. Of the 551 scholars assessed, 39 received a zero on the Independent pretest (20 Level I, 14 Level II, and 5 Level III). Seventy-eight Scholars received a zero on the Frustration pretest (72 Level I and 6 Level II). At posttest, 21 Scholars’ Independent scores were recoded to zero (14 Level I, 6 Level II, and 1 Level III) and 38 Scholars’ Frustration scores were recoded to zero (37 Level I and 1 Level II). Scholars who reached a ceiling score of ninth grade at the Independent, Instructional or Frustration level at pre- and posttest were

assigned a score of 10 to capture their upper limit. While those Scholars might have been able to read beyond 10th grade level, assigning a 10 allows us to capture the minimum of their upper limit. Sixteen Scholars (5 Level II and 11 Level III) reached the upper limit in the Frustration pretest; none reached the max score in the Independent pretest. Twenty-nine Scholars were able to reach the max on the Frustration posttest (seven of those also reached this score in the pretest; 11 Level II and 18 Level III); one Scholar received the max recode score on the Independent posttest.

Scholars' demographic characteristics are reported in percentages for categorical variables and means (standard deviations) for continuous variables. Because the outcome variables were not normally distributed, nonparametric tests were used. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine whether there was a significant change from pretest to posttest for the whole sample and for each Scholar level. Next, difference scores were computed (posttest score minus pretest score) to determine the proportion of Scholars whose scores improved, were maintained, or declined over the course of the program. Associations between continuous demographic characteristics and difference scores were assessed using Spearman correlations. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine associations between categorical demographic variables and the outcome measures. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine significance. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.0.

## **Results**

### **Demographic characteristics**

As shown in Table 3, the sample was predominately African American (74.9%) and female (54.8%). Most Scholars participated in the free lunch program at their respective school (91.3%) and just over half had prior FSP experience; a small proportion repeated a grade (5.7%). Level II Scholars made up just more than half the sample (51.5%).

**Table 3.** Demographic characteristics of the analytic sample (N = 299)

	Percent/Mean(SD)
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Race/Ethnicity	
African American	74.9
Hispanic/Latino	11.5
Mixed/Multi-racial	4.7
White/Caucasian	2.7
Asian	1.7
Other/Unknown	1.0
Gender	
Male	45.2
Female	54.8
Level	
I (Kinder – 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	23.7
II (3 <sup>rd</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> grade)	51.5
III (6 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)	24.7
Free lunch program participation	91.3
Prior grade retention	5.7
Previous FSP experience	56.9
Years FSP experience	1.32 (1.59)
Grades completed	4.15 (2.04)
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## Independent Reading Performance

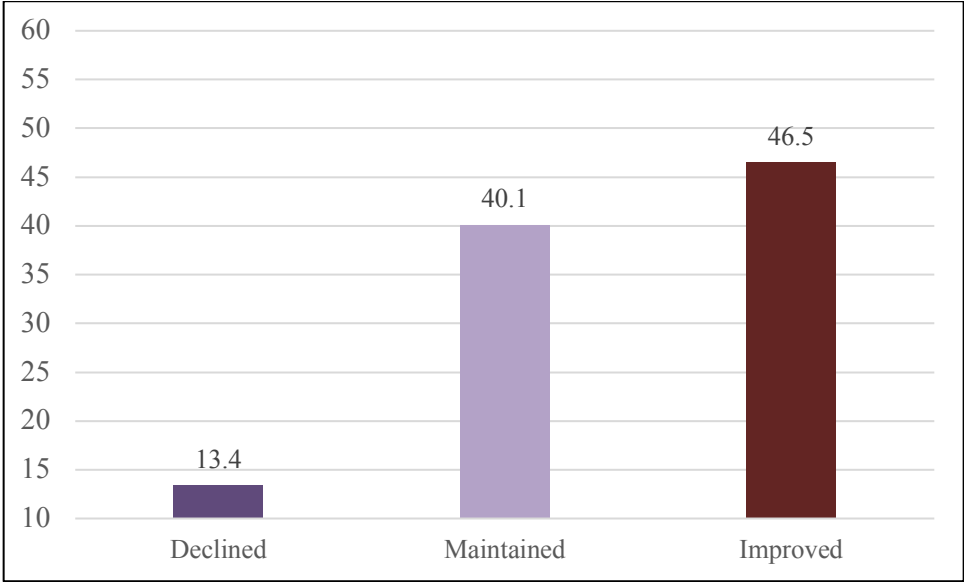
As shown in Table 4, the mean for the entire sample on the Independent score fell just below the third-grade level. Scores improved across the sample by nearly a grade, a mean difference of .70, which was statistically significant based on the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test ( $Z = -8.03, p < .001$ ). At the Scholar Level, results indicated that the mean pretest score among Level I participants improved by just more than half a grade at the posttest (.57), a difference that was statistically significant ( $Z = -.395, p < .001$ ). Similar results were observed among Level II Scholars ( $Z = -5.06, p < .001$ ). Level III Scholars showed the most improvement, with a mean difference of 1.10 from pre- to posttest, which was also significant ( $Z = -5.19, p < .001$ ).

**Table 4.** Mean (Standard Deviations) Independent scores by Scholar Level and Total sample (N = 299)

	<i>N</i>	Pretest <i>M (SD)</i>	Posttest <i>M (SD)</i>
Level			
I	71	1.53 (1.27)	2.10 (1.35)
II	154	2.81 (1.40)	3.38 (1.80)
III	74	3.35 (1.72)	4.45 (2.24)
Total	299	2.64 (1.60)	3.34 (2.00)

Figure 5 shows the proportion of Scholars who improved over time, were able to maintain their performance, or declined over the course of the program. Results indicated that just less than half of Scholars improved on the Independent test (46.5%). Forty percent were able to maintain their performance on the Independent test. However, 13.4% declined over time. Further analysis revealed that among the 40 Scholars who declined, Level II Scholars had the highest proportion at 62.5% compared to Level I (15%) and Level III Scholars (22.5%).

**Figure 5.** Distribution of Independent Reading Performance Over Time (N = 299)



Results from the Spearman correlations indicated that there was a significant and positive association between grade and difference scores (posttest minus pretest) or change ( $\rho = .131$ ,  $p = .024$ ). No significant associations were observed based on the Kruskal-Wallis test.

While Scholars who were not able to achieve the basal test score on the Independent pretest were excluded from the analysis, it is important to note that 35 (26%) of the 133 Scholars without a pretest score were able to achieve a score on the posttest.

**Frustration Reading Performance**

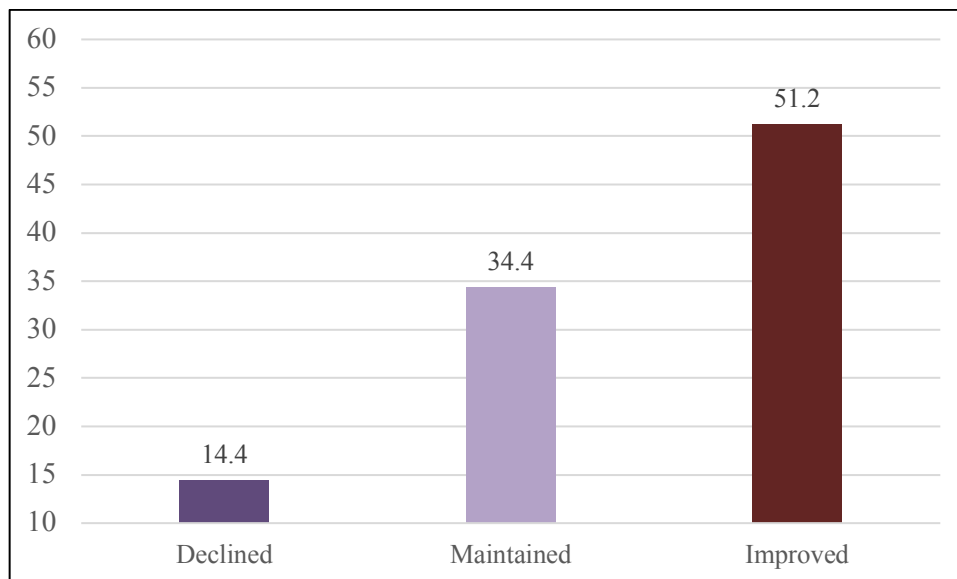
Mean scores at the Scholar Level and for the total sample are reported in Table 5, which shows that the entire sample had a mean improvement of nearly a full grade (.89). This difference was statistically significant ( $Z = -8.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Scholars at Level I had a mean improvement of .71 points, which was significant ( $Z = -5.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Level II Scholars also showed mean improvement of nearly a full grade (.82), a difference that was statistically significant ( $Z = -7.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Scholars at Level III showed the most improvement, with more than a full grade’s growth over time (1.23 mean difference). This change was also significant  $Z = -5.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 5.** Mean (Standard Deviations) Frustration scores by Scholar Level and Total (N = 299)

	<i>N</i>	Pretest <i>M (SD)</i>	Posttest <i>M (SD)</i>
Level			
I	71	4.13 (1.34)	4.85 (1.80)
II	154	5.45 (1.56)	6.27 (2.03)
III	74	6.07 (1.63)	7.30 (2.18)
Total	299	5.29 (1.68)	6.18 (2.19)

With regard to performance over time, Figure 6 shows that a little more than half the sample improved over time (51.2%). Also, just more than a third were able to maintain their pretest performance (34.4%) and 14.4% declined over time. Of the 45 Scholars whose performance declined, 70% were in Level II, 22.5% in Level I and 20% were in Level III.

**Figure 6.** Distribution of Frustration Reading Performance Over Time (N = 299)



Results from the Spearman correlations indicated a significant and positive correlation between grade and difference score ( $\rho = .116, p = .044$ ), with higher grades associated with improvement. As with the Independent test, no significant associations were observed from the Kruskal-Wallis test.



## Discussion

The primary objective of this evaluation was to determine whether Scholars exhibited a change in Independent and Frustration measures designed to assess reading performance. Results from the Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests showed that there was a significant improvement in mean test scores on the Independent measures for the entire sample and for each Scholar level ( $p < .05$ ). On average, Scholars improved more than half a grade from pre- to posttest (.70). However, Level III Scholars showed the most growth on the Independent posttest, with a mean change of 1.10 or more than a full grade.

This evaluation also aimed to identify the proportion of Scholars who were able to maintain or improve their reading performance over the course of the program. When looking at the proportion of Scholars whose performance improved, maintained, or declined over time, we found that close to half were able to show growth (46.5%). The results also indicated that 40% were able to maintain their pretest performance, which is important given the risk of summer reading loss observed in children not engaged in literacy-related activities (Cooper, 2003; Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000). Despite the promising results, we also found that 13.4% declined or showed a drop in performance over time. Additionally, analysis revealed that Scholars at Level II had the largest proportion (62.5%, 25 of 40 Scholars) of children whose performance declined. This is important information because it allows FSP to identify potential areas of improvement. Thus, it will be important to determine which factors contribute to a decline in performance in Scholars at level II, such as child motivation, attendance, intern training, reading materials, etc.

Results from the Frustration data analysis indicated that Scholars at all levels demonstrated significant mean improvement from pre- to posttest ( $p < .05$ ). The results also showed that most of the sample did not decline over time: 51.2% improved and 34.3% maintained performance. However, this means that 14.4% did experience a drop in performance from pre- to posttest, a proportion that was larger than the Independent test (13.4%). As with the Independent measure, Level II Scholars had the largest proportion of Scholars whose performance declined on the Frustration measure. Given the trend in declined performance among Scholars at level II, it is vital that we identify contributing factors to allow FSP to develop intervention plans that will reduce the number of Level II Scholars whose performance declines.

In addition to determining whether Scholars improved, maintained, or declined in reading performance and mean change over time, we found that grade was positively and significantly correlated with difference scores. This means that older children demonstrated the most improvement from pre- to posttest. Indeed, the results from the Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests support these significant correlations. Several factors might explain these findings. First, older

children might experience more confidence and/or motivation in reading. Older children also have more experience with printed materials and reading skills compared to younger children. Finally, older children might have a shorter distance to go to show improvement compared to younger readers. These results can help us better identify factors that contribute to student improvement so we can apply those lessons to Level II Scholars, who appear to show the most decline on both measures.

## THE CENTER FOR ADOLESCENT LITERACIES AT UNC CHARLOTTE

The Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte is focused on developing instruction to make literacy and learning relevant and effective for adolescents and those who work with them. The Center also conducts research and service in support of its primary mission.

The mission of the Center for Adolescent Literacies (CAL) at UNC Charlotte is to advance the literacy achievement of adolescents in urban school settings and to develop pedagogies for adolescents and those who work with them to prepare them to be productive and empowered 21st century citizens. Specifically, the objectives of our center are:

- To provide community outreach
- To build cultural understanding and awareness
- To promote community engagements
- To encourage civic engagement through service learning
- To equip teachers, parents, and pre-service teachers with knowledge, skills, and dispositions for supporting and scaffolding adolescent literacy and service learning
- To develop and provide collaborative professional development to promote adolescent literacy
- To encourage collaborative involvement among all stakeholders (including teachers, students, parents/guardians, and university faculty).

### Evaluation Leadership Team

**Dr. Bruce Taylor** is the Director of the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte and is a Professor in the Department of Reading & Elementary Education. For more than 15 years, Dr. Taylor has provided leadership in developing the ReadWriteServe (RWS) community-based literacy initiatives at UNC Charlotte. His research examines the social and cultural aspects of literacy and learning of adolescents and, in particular, ways to meet the academic learning needs of diverse and marginalized students. He has led several reading program evaluation projects. Dr. Taylor teaches undergraduate, master's level, and doctoral courses that focus on content-area and adolescent literacy, digital literacies in education, and sociocultural aspects of language and literacy.

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## Appendix A: Review of Research

*Note: This review of related research is updated with each evaluation cycle. We review the research literature and add to this section but retain much of what has been reviewed in earlier reports.*

Freedom Schools programs are six-week, literacy-based summer learning programs designed for children at risk of school failure. The risk factors that children in poverty face include lower academic achievement as measured by grades and on standardized tests, lower graduation rates, and difficulties with reading and literacy. Literacy is a key aspect of school completion. Results from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that 31% of fourth-grade and 26% of eighth-grade public school students in North Carolina scored below the Basic level in reading. Only 39% of fourth-grade and 33% of eighth-grade students scored at or above the Proficient level. Given that NAEP scores for North Carolina have changed little over the past decade, they continue to raise concerns about the reading ability of school-age children in North Carolina.

Youth from low-income households tend to have lower reading achievement scores than children from middle- and high-income households. Each school year, the reading achievement gap grows and much of the distance accrues during the summer when children are not as inclined to read. A study by Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) examined the leisure reading habits of 584 urban adolescents (grades 5 – 8). One of their findings indicated that summer reading was not a “popular” activity for either male or female urban youth. However, it is known that for at-risk children, summer reading is essential to bridge the reading achievement gap (Allington & McGill-Frazen, 2003; Kim, 2004). Schacter (2003) studied the summer reading achievement of 61 first graders in Los Angeles. His study found that an 8-week summer reading “camp” experience had bearing on vocabulary, comprehension, phonics, and oral reading. Thus, for at-risk urban children, a summer program that focuses on reading has the potential to positively influence reading achievement. More recently, a study of 31 six and seven-year-old children enrolled in a summer program with a structured reading program showed benefits in stemming summer learning loss (McDaniel, McLeod, Carter & Robinson, 2017).

Research on the CDF Freedom Schools programs has focused on the historical context of the program (Watson, 2014), ideological contexts (Smith, 2010), leadership aspects of the Freedom School program, the impact on college-age Servant Leader Interns (Jackson, 2009a) and implications for teacher education (Coffey, 2009; Davis, 2010; Jackson, 2009b; Jackson, 2011). Stanford (2017) documented the instructional practices of three current classroom teachers who formerly served as Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) in Freedom Schools noting that transfer of Freedom School practices to public school classrooms was low. An overview of the Freedom School program was published in *Teaching Tolerance* (Williamson, 2013). Bethea (2012)

published results of a study that indicate that involvement in the Freedom School program in Oakland, California had a positive influence on Scholars' racial identity and views toward African/African American culture. Pre- and posttest results also showed an increase in social skills strategies and a future commitment to social action; however, the study showed no statistically significant increase in attitudes toward reading. McKay-Jackson (2014) conducted an analysis to examine critical social emotional learning and social political development of youth in a Chicago Freedom School program. Howard (2015) examines Freedom Schools as a model for reimagining education for Black children that re-centers learning, literacy, and culture in an atmosphere that is free from a police presence in schools. In 2019, Lara-Cinisomo, Taylor and Medina published an analysis of Freedom School data from summers 2010 through 2013. Findings from this study suggest that the Freedom School program sites included in the study helped children improve their reading as measured using the BRI over time, with improvement most notable in children in higher grade levels and those most vulnerable (i.e., grade repetition) also showing growth.

### **Summer Learning Loss**

The 9-month school schedule currently in widespread use has its roots in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century society in which 85% of Americans were involved in agriculture. It made sense at the time to standardize school schedules and to have children at home during the summer months to help with farming. Today fewer than 3% of Americans are involved in agriculture and research shows that students' learning is impacted negatively by this block of time away from school.

There is a growing body of research about summer learning loss including the publication in the last year of a comprehensive book on the subject, *The Summer Slide: What We Know and Can Do about Summer Learning Loss* (Alexander, Pitcock, & Boulay, 2016). A review of research (meta-analysis) by Kim and Quinn (2013) on summer reading interventions conducted in the United States and Canada from 1998 to 2011 showed that summer reading interventions that employed teacher-directed literacy lessons had a positive effect on K-8 participants' reading comprehension. The effect of these summer interventions was stronger for children from low-income backgrounds than from mixed-income backgrounds. A recent study by Gershenson and Hayes (2017) on the summer activities of exceptional students, which they define as English language learners and students with an individualized educational plan (IEP), shows that these students are less likely to participate in organized summer programs but show greater gains in reading than other groups of students. Bowers and Schwarz (2018) documented gains for low-SES children participating in a summer literacy program at a local community center. Meta-analyses conducted by Cooper et al. (2000 and 1996) integrating studies examining the effects of summer vacation on standardized achievement test scores showed that summer learning loss equaled at least one month of instruction as measured by grade level equivalents on

standardized test scores. An analysis of the research of Hayes and Grether (1983) with high- and low-poverty students in 600 New York City schools showed that rich and poor students had a seven-month difference in scores at the beginning of second grade, but this widened to a difference of two years and seven months by the end of grade six. What made this particularly striking was the research showing little or no difference in these students' achievement when school was in session: they learned at the same pace. As Hayes and Grether noted: "The differential progress made during the four summers between 2nd and 6th grade accounts for upwards of 80 percent of the achievement difference between economically advantaged ... and ... ghetto schools."

Research from the past decade shows that the impact of summer learning loss may be greater than found in earlier studies (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). This deficit is so pronounced that Allington and McGill-Franzen dub summer reading loss as the "smoking gun." Their research has reported that the cumulative effects of summer reading loss can mean that struggling readers entering middle school may lag two years behind peers in their ability to read. Additional research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007) traces the achievement gap between high-socioeconomic and low-socioeconomic 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to the loss in reading proficiency that occurs over the summer months throughout the elementary grades. Summer learning loss across the elementary school years accounted for more than half the difference in the achievement gap between students from high-socioeconomic and low-socioeconomic families. A study by Kim (2004) published by The Center for Evaluation of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences highlights that low-income and minority students experience greater summer reading loss but suggest that summer reading mitigates this negative impact. A 2014 study by Menard and Wilson suggests that the effect on students with reading disabilities (RD) is greater than on non-RD students while another study (Sandburg Patton & Reschly, 2013) suggests greater impact on younger students.

The issue of summer learning loss is not only debated in scholarly journals. In 2010, *Time Magazine* published a cover story entitled "The Case against Summer" (Von Drehle, 2010) in which it reported:

The problem of summer vacation, first documented in 1906, compounds year after year. What starts as a hiccup in a 6-year-old's education can be a crisis by the time that child reaches high school. After collecting a century's worth of academic studies, summer-learning expert Harris Cooper, ... concluded that, on average, all students lose about a month of progress in math skills each summer, while low-income students slip as many as three months in reading comprehension, compared with middle-income students.

Calls to reorganize school calendars and extend the school year have been suggested as a way to deal with the issue of summer learning loss (Aronson, Zimmerman & Carols, 1998; Dechenes & Malone, 2011; Dessoff, 2011; Jimerson, Woehr, Kaufman & Anderson, 2003; Silva, 2007; WestEd, 2001; Woelfel, 2005). Additional research focuses on policy and funding towards mitigating summer learning loss as a way to address gaps in academic achievement (Leefatt, 2015) while other research suggests parent tutoring during the summer as a means for helping many struggling readers (Mitchell & Begeny, 2014). More recent research indicates that summer programs with a math and literacy component can help students realize gains in their math and reading abilities during the summer months (Graham, McNamara & Van Lankveld, 2011; Smith, 2011-2012). Recent scholarship has included more on the role of summer programs to mitigate summer learning loss (McCombs, et al., 2012) and even “do-at-home” activities (Nikirk, 2012). Research on summer learning loss has recently extended to the post-secondary level with research on summer and between-semester knowledge decay (Dills, Hernandez-Julian, & Rotthoff, 2016).

## **Appendix B. Rationale for the Use of IRIs**

The ESRI, like the BRI, is a reading evaluation measure that takes into account different aspects of reading including word knowledge, fluency, and comprehension with greatest emphasis on comprehension, or meaning making. The ESRI is a good fit to both the goals of the Freedom School reading program and also to the contexts of that program. The IRC component of Freedom Schools, described earlier, engages students in the reading of culturally diverse books. Scholars and Interns read, discuss and engage in activities related to the books. The focus of this culturally diverse literature-based experience is on comprehension rather than a subskills approach to reading.

Reading inventories like the ESRI and BRI are well suited to reading programs like Freedom Schools. They have compatible forms for pre- and post-test administration to measure change over the relatively short duration of the program. They span the K-8 grade levels, the grade and age range of Scholars in the Level I, II and III classrooms, and are practical to administer in terms of cost, time and resources. They allow for fidelity in administration so that multiple evaluators could be trained to assess Scholars using common guidelines for administration and scoring and have a solid research base.

Reading assessments have their roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century but came of age in the 1940s with the study of skills that comprise comprehension (Davis, 1944; Davis, 1968). Today, reading comprehension assessments are the most common type of published reading test that is available, and the most common reading comprehension assessments involve reading of passages followed by questions about the passage (usually literal recall) and then repeat this process with additional “disconnected” passages (p. 6, Educational Testing Service, 2012). These traditional approaches to measuring comprehension focus on creating items that consist of lists of content and skills rather than an approach that focuses on what students know and should be able to do (ETS, 2012). Variations on this include asking inferential questions in addition to recall questions. Most reading assessments include what is thought of as the basic skill components of comprehension which include word identification, inferences, strategies, vocabulary and lexical knowledge (Sabatini, O’Reilly & Albro, 2012a and 2012b).

Reading assessments fall into two broad categories: formal and informal. Formal assessments are commonly known as standardized tests or measures and have data which often support conclusions about how a student’s reading can be compared to other students his or her age. Formal measures are used to assess overall achievement and to compare a student to others at their age or grade. Scores are often given in percentiles or stanines and many are helpful as diagnostic tools or for measuring change over longer periods of time (year to year in schools, for example). Informal reading measures are content and performance driven and are often

used to inform instructional practices or progress monitoring over short intervals for individual students. Leslie and Caldwell (2009) define informal measures as assessments that “do not interpret scores using comparative or normative data or employ standardized procedures for administration and scoring” (p. 410). Informal measures are often used by classroom teachers and others to gain insight into student performance and to inform instruction. Examples of informal assessments with a focus on comprehension include: questions, retellings, informal reading inventories (i.e., the ESRI), think-alouds, and most assessments that fall under the heading of performance or authentic assessments.

Formal and informal assessments measure comprehension but informal measures of reading are better suited for this research because they measure change over a short duration and typically require less time and fewer resources. Formal assessments are usually more expensive to purchase and may require computer administration and/or scoring. There are numerous reading assessments but many of these focus on a narrow range of grades and ages. For example, there are several early literacy assessments such as the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basis Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) that span grades K-2 or 3. Informal Reading Inventories (IRI), however, span a larger range of grades from Kindergarten or first grade through grades eight or nine. Costs for IRIs are relatively low and most come in paper/pencil formats although they do require adult one-on-one administration.

The IRI has a long history as a tool for measuring comprehension and reading ability. Most IRIs include measures of word recognition using leveled lists of words and leveled passages read aloud or silently. Nilsson (2008) states in his review of eight IRIs that these assessments provide information about students’ strengths and needs as well as charting reading progress over time. Leslie and Caldwell (2009), authors of the *Qualitative Reading Inventory* (Leslie & Caldwell, 2016), raise the following issues about IRIs: 1) readability formulas used to determine passage levels may not accurately measure difference in difficulty of one passage from another, 2) passage equivalency across forms may vary, and 3) questions used to measure comprehension may work differently with different text types and topics. Research conducted by Applegate, Quinn and Applegate (2002) further suggest that IRIs focus more on text-based recall rather than inferential questions. These issues are not unique to IRIs but also reflect concerns with other forms of reading assessments including standardized assessments. Research by Spector (2005) suggests that IRIs are best suited for low-stakes decisions such as assessing reading levels (which aids in book selection and evaluation) but should not be used for diagnosing reading difficulties. Also, IRIs typically do not offer a fine-grained analysis of growth but, rather, measure reading difference in grade-level increments.

Both formal and informal reading assessments are used for program assessment. However, IRIs were used more frequently for short-term pre/post-test administration while standardized

measures were more likely to be administered when repeated measures were not used for purposes of evaluation. The STAR Reading by Renaissance Learning is another test used by some programs for evaluation purposes, but was found unsuitable by our team for several reasons. According to the publisher STAR Reading is “designed for students who can read independently” (Renaissance Learning, Inc., 2010), and some Freedom School Scholars are emergent readers, not yet reading at an independent level. Moreover, STAR is a timed test providing each student a fixed amount of time for reading a passage and then between 45 and 60 seconds to answer questions after which moves to the next question. We felt this also would present problems for emergent and struggling readers. Finally, STAR is a computer-based test, and some Freedom School sites lack access to computers or sufficient numbers of computers to properly administer this type of assessment.

Our analysis of reading assessments, outlined above, led us to the conclusion that IRIs were best suited to the Freedom School evaluation project, and in 2008 we determined that the BRI would be our IRI of choice and based on results from 2016, we adopted the ESRI for the 2017 evaluation.