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Executive Summary - The Philadelphia Freedom Schools Junior Leader Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Philadelphia Freedom Schools Junior Leader Project is a bold initiative to foster leadership and civic engagement for young people in the Philadelphia School District. Beginning in 1999, the school district project was developed to help young African American and other high school students to become strong leaders in their schools and communities. The Junior Leader project recruited freshmen, sophomores, and juniors in high school to learn about their heritage; work with young children to help them gain academic skills; participate in meaningful dialogue about social justice; learn and engage in community action strategies; develop leadership skills; and create pathways for leading enriched, healthy lives and contribute to the community and society at large. This evaluation report presents the results of the Philadelphia Freedom Schools Project for the period from April 2001 to June 2002.

Methodology

RMC Research conducted the evaluation of the Philadelphia Freedom Schools Project using multiple methods. *Surveys* were administered to 205 Junior Leaders during the spring and 162 Junior Leaders during the summer. *Interviews* were conducted with 36 Junior Leaders in the spring, and 17 academic advisors, site coordinators, and project directors in the spring and summer. Nineteen *focus groups* were conducted with Junior Leaders and college interns in the summer. *Observations* were made of the training activities, Freedom Schools curriculum delivery, and Wednesday night meetings. *Documents* about the project were analyzed including Junior Leaders' projects conducted for the Education for Liberation summit, several portfolios, and many culminating reflections.

Phase One: Recruitment, Selection, and Training

The Philadelphia Freedom Schools Junior Leader project recruited approximately 250 students, 200 of whom came from households living at or below the poverty line set by the U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce Investment Act. During Phase One, students who were selected to be Junior Leaders attended training sessions at the Alex Haley Farm or Shaw University. Training sessions were reported to be intense and pleasurable. During that time, Junior Leaders were exposed to the Freedom Schools philosophy and acquired skills to help them tutor young children. Students learned about their heritage and said that they were inspired by cultural and spiritual leaders. Being teenagers, they complained about the food, the long hours, and being awakened early in the morning. Overall, they believed the training was a strongly motivating, moving experience that convinced them of the need to work for and with the community.

Phase Two: Development of a Community of Learners and of Action

During Phase Two, Junior Leaders attended classes to help them learn about leadership and the importance of education, worked in summer Freedom Schools with School District children, and researched important issues related to education and citizenship by conducting community surveys and other forms of information gathering. Several groups administered community surveys and developed and implemented social action strategies to address community concerns. Junior Leaders took part in Wednesday night sessions to share experiences and develop strategies for addressing community issues in a positive way. During a culminating event called the Education for Liberation Summit, students shared reports and visual displays of their work, and actively participated in an important dialogue with city leaders about education issues.

The Junior Leaders greatly enjoyed the tutoring experience and the opportunities to learn about their heritage and strategies for becoming more active citizens. Surveys showed that after the experience, they took more responsibility for their own success, had more confidence, were more motivated to become well educated, and gained greater respect for teachers. In the self-report surveys, they also said they engaged in activities that led to personal improvement, increased standards for personal and other's performance, heightened awareness of social issues, and altruism. After their participation, more Junior Leaders reported that they would definitely attend an institution of higher education. They felt more connected with community and felt they acquired more and stronger leadership skills. The young people felt they had a more realistic view of what it would take to be successful in high school.

College interns and academic advisors valued their participation as well, reporting that they enjoyed and learned from the experience. Document analysis from the work produced over the summer revealed that students developed more complex analytic frames with which to view the world and that they engaged in higher levels of participatory and justice oriented citizenship activities. While there were a few complaints during Phase Two, primarily around logistics and scheduling, this project was seen as worthwhile by nearly all who participated.

Phase Three: Deeper Learning, Application of Knowledge, and Connecting to Community

During Phase Three, 30 to 40 Junior Leaders participated in social action groups that emanated from their summer community action work. Throughout the academic year, each group met on a regular basis to converse and investigate a particular issue that was collectively defined. Facilitated by Freedom Schools Group Leaders, the groups read books, journals, and other written materials, conducted research, and creatively developed strategies for addressing the issues they identified. Junior Leaders had the opportunity to speak publicly about the issues and to partake in activities to make a difference in their community. Analysis of student essays written at the end of this phase showed that the Junior Leaders became more sophisticated in their analysis of the Philadelphia school finance issue, showing the impact of unfair distribution of funding on personal, social, and community attitudes and behaviors. They identified multiple solutions to these particular issues and other community matters of concern. They also identified several key areas where they believed funding should be allocated. In some cases, Junior

Leaders who participated in Phase Three moved from an analysis of community problems that had an individual locus to one that was systemic.

Conclusions

Each phase of the Philadelphia Freedom Schools Junior Leader project showed important impacts on student participants, primarily in the areas of civic engagement, community connectedness, motivation to learn, sophistication of analysis (cognitive complexity), and career knowledge. Each of the Freedom Schools goals was substantially met:

Goal 1: Increased Motivation to Learn and Academic Competency

Junior Leaders showed an increase in motivation to learn, saw the value in becoming well educated, and learned important academic skills in language arts, history, and the social sciences. They felt more consciously aware of their purpose and assumed more responsibility for their own success. Junior Leaders gained more confidence in themselves as able learners. They also gained more respect for teachers.

Goal 2: Higher Education Readiness

Junior Leaders expressed statistically significant higher aspirations in terms of enrollment in institutions of higher education. They reported a more realistic view of what it will take to succeed in undergraduate education.

Goal 3: Career Exposure

Junior Leaders reported a heightened awareness and knowledge of multiple career possibilities.

Goal 4: Sense of Self, Community, and Culture

Junior Leaders showed a statistically significant increase in their feelings of connectedness to community and American society. Female leaders revealed statistically significant differences in their willingness to take action and make a change in society. Junior Leaders acquired more leadership skills, increased their ability to plan projects, and showed a trend toward increased resilience.

Goal 5: Civic Engagement

Junior Leaders acquired beliefs, knowledge, and skills necessary to participate as active and engaged citizens, understanding and addressing problems in their schools and communities. They became more connected to both local communities and the larger society.

Because of the many benefits for its participants, the School District and the City of Philadelphia should find a regular funding source so that it may institutionalize the project as an option for all high school students.