



Department of
Youth Services

Message from DYS Director Harvey Reed
Freedom Schools: Fostering a Love of Reading
July 30, 2014

There's a lot of singing, dancing, stomping and clapping going on throughout our facilities these days.

It's all good.

The youth are learning. Yes, learning.

It's called Freedom Schools and the goal is simple: foster a love of reading.

DYS launched the Freedom Schools program just a few weeks ago in partnership with the Children's Defense Fund. Youth participate on a voluntary basis during intersession and on weekends. Ohio is the first juvenile justice system to offer the program statewide.

If you walked into one of our schools during the most recent intersession around 8 a.m., you would find our youth moving left to right and swaying to the music. Freedom Schools starts with a group activity called Harambee, 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.

After the 30-minute Harambee session, youth engage in more reading activities for the remainder of the school day with the help of youth specialists and college students who are trained as Servant Leader Interns (SLI).

During the program, youth will read at least six books.



A total of 60 youth are participating in the Freedom Schools program. Here, teachers and youth at Circleville JCF start the day with a few chants and cheers.

“Since the inception of the CJCF Freedom Schools, the youth have been extremely excited to participate with the program,” said Cornelius Lawrence, coordinator of Freedom Schools at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility (CJCF). “The youth have committed to reading and participating in the activities while promoting a healthy pro-social environment. The word is spreading quickly throughout the institution about the joys of being a part of Freedom Schools, creating a buzz for other youth to join,” he added.

The reaction from youth is positive. “It’s cool, a lot of energy. It gets you hyped and ready. I’ve learned a lot of new things. I really enjoy reading. The activities are a lot of fun, and I am learning a lot of things I have never known. It’s helping me become a better reader,” said a youth from Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility (IRJCF).

A youth from Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility (CHJCF) says it’s having a positive effect on him. “I notice my words have changed. The way that I approach people and the way that I speak has changed. Plus, I have learned how to use empathy towards someone when they are talking.”

“Freedom Schools rock,” said another CHJCF youth.

Staff is rocking at Freedom Schools, too.

“I have noticed changes in staff and youth. I have seen staff that normally would not participate in activities get up and sing and dance with the youth,” said Beth Myers, coordinator of Freedom Schools at IRJCF. “I have seen the youth step up and be leaders and want to show people how they can positively influence others. The first day of the program many youth and staff looked as if to say, ‘There is no way I am doing that’. Now they are all participating and excited to show up every day.”

A lot of people have worked hard to launch the program. Thank you to Jennifer Sanders, Executive Director of Freedom Schools; Kim Humphrey and Gwen Randle, Project Directors; Cornelius Lawrence, CJCF; Beth Myers, IRJCF and Mark Dobrzynski, CHJCF; Site Coordinators.

I also wish to extend my appreciation to the following youth specialists who are serving as SLIs: Classie Mixon, CJCF; Rory Jackson, CJCF; Stacey Rodriguez, CHJCF; Tammi Lampkin, CHJCF; Montoyia Weir, IRJCF and Brett Bird, IRJCF. In addition, thank you to these college students working as the External SLIs: Brea Porter, CJCF; Miracle McGowan, CJCF; Ryan Calvin, CJCF; Tor Smith, CHJCF; Brittany Jermon, CHJCF; Justin Burnett, CHJCF; Ariana Smith, IRJCF and Jake Streeter, IRJCF. Dr. Patricia Cunningham is the External Project Director.