

Chicago church awarded grant to start Freedom School

Posted: August 19 2022 at 03:36 PM

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ST. MARK UMC LEADERS AND GUESTS CELEBRATE A \$350,000 YEARLY GRANT FOR THREE YEARS TO OPEN A FREEDOM SCHOOL TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN THE CHATHAM NEIGHBORHOOD IN CHICAGO.

Children and youth in Chicago's Chatham neighborhood on the city's South Side will soon get additional educational support to give them a head start thanks to a new Freedom School opening at St. Mark United Methodist Church.

On Sunday, August 14, St. Mark UMC announced the church received a \$350,000 renewable yearly grant for three years from the Illinois State Board of Education to start a Freedom School as a continued effort to provide social and economic equity through unique learning opportunities.

“We are honored to receive this grant, but we are more excited about the impact it’s going to have on the children and our community,” said Rev. P. Devon Brown, senior pastor at St. Mark. “The Freedom School teaches the students reading, writing and arithmetic in the context of their culture and history, which will build self-esteem and help raise competent young people to grow into adults who contribute to the community.”

In April 2022, the state of Illinois announced a \$17 million grant to build the first state-funded network of Freedom Schools in the country. The schools date back to the 1960s when volunteers traveled to Mississippi to teach Black students how to read and write, along with lessons on constitutional rights and African American history.

Chicago 6th Ward Alderman Roderick T. Sawyer said he’s pleased the state chose St. Mark for the grant and believes the Freedom School will be vital to the community.

“Any educational institution like this will uplift the citizens in this community and I think it will be enlightening to the youth, their parents and community members who get involved,” said Sawyer. “We have to make sure people know they matter and that they have the rights and privileges of every other student, and I think this Freedom School will make that happen.”

In 1995, Marian Wright Edelman, civil rights activist and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), took the name and founded the Freedom School Program. CDF’s mission is to "ensure every child a healthy start, a head start, a fair start, a safe start and a moral start in life, and a successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities."

Rev. Pamela Pirtle, who is serving on staff at St. Mark, first introduced the idea of starting a Freedom School with the church's Youth and Family Center and brought together a team to work on applying for the Phillip Jackson Freedom School grant that is part of the state’s Education and Workforce Equity Act enacted last March.

"We know the rich history of this program not only changes children's lives, it positively impacts communities," said Pirtle. "We can't wait to welcome the scholars, as they're called under the program, and we can't wait to see these young people be inspired with hope and self-confidence as the literacy gap is closed."

According to the CDF Freedom Schools website, the program provides summer and after-school enrichment through a research-based and multicultural program model that supports K-12 scholars and their families through five essential components: character-building enrichment, parent and family



CHILDREN AT MANY FREEDOM SCHOOLS START THE DAY WITH A HARAMBEE RITUAL. HARAMBEE IN SWAHILI MEANS “LET’S PULL TOGETHER.” SCREENSHOT PHOTO FROM PHILADELPHIA FREEDOM SCHOOLS LITERACY ACADEMY VIDEO.

involvement, intergenerational servant leadership development, civic engagement, and nutrition, health and mental health.

Since 1995, CDF says the program has educated more than 150,000 children (K–12) and trained more than 17,000 young adults and child advocates on the Freedom Schools model. About five Freedom Schools exist in Chicago and more than 200 across the country, according to Jon Hale, Associate Professor of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and author of the 2016 book “The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement” (New York: Columbia University Press).

“Illinois will have the largest Freedom School network in the county with this grant program,” said Hale, who added this kind of funding is rare as many states are cutting education funding. “Hopefully, this inspires more state support since this type of education is critically important. The after-school program supports what’s being taught in schools and the six-week summer program fills that summer learning gap.” Hale, who consulted with St. Mark, says Freedom Schools provide tremendous support for young students by providing high-quality education, excellent teaching, and connections to mentors. He says this education is needed now more than ever.

"They (Freedom Schools) have become so much more important because COVID-19 has devastated public education in terms of funding, displacing students and teachers, and increasing privatization," Hale told the Illinois News Bureau.



CDF says many sponsors have returned to safe operation this year, offering in-person, virtual, and hybrid programs. In 2021, CDF Freedom Schools partnered with 94 organizations to serve over 7,200 children at 152 program sites.

Rev. Arlene Christopherson, NIC Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Connectional Ministries, praised St. Mark for receiving this grant and said the church is up to the challenge.

"I know from my time working with you that this church invests in youth and children from your martial arts program, youth choir, youth groups, Sunday school; it's in your DNA," Christopherson told the congregation. "In this era in our society, our youth need more support, guidance, and opportunities than ever before. We need the moral grounding that you can give through this school."

St. Mark will open its after-school program in October 2022 and offer the summer program starting June 2023. For more information and to get involved, visit stmarkumcchicago.org (<http://stmarkumcchicago.org>).

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