

CARSON SCHOLARS FUND RESEARCH REPORT: Key Findings from the Carson Scholars Program and Ben Carson Reading Room Project



FERA

Formative Evaluation Research Associates

1427 Warrington Cr.
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
Ph. 734/994-9060
www.feraonline.com

CARSON SCHOLARS FUND: DISCOVERING PROMISE... REWARDING EXCELLENCE

The Carson Scholars Fund's mission is to:

"... impact the nation in a positive way by cultivating future leaders who are not only intellectually talented but also socially conscious."

The Carson Scholars Fund, Inc., was founded in 1994 to address the education and leadership crisis in the United States. The Fund is a national nonprofit that implements two initiatives: the Carson Scholars Program and the Ben Carson Reading Project. Both were started by world-renowned Johns Hopkins Pediatric Neurosurgeon, Benjamin S. Carson, M.D. and his wife, Candy.

The Carson Scholars Program recognizes and rewards academic excellence in young students (4th–11th grade) who also have strong humanitarian qualities. What makes the Carson Scholars Fund different from other scholarships is that recipients are elementary and secondary students instead of college-aged students, the typical scholarship recipients. Students in 4th–11th grade are eligible to be nominated by their schools to apply to be a Carson Scholar. Scholars attend a regional banquet, receive a medal, receive recognition from their schools, and their names are added to a trophy that is displayed in their school.

The Ben Carson Reading Project was developed in 2000 to support early grade literacy by promoting leisure reading as a key to unlocking a child's full learning potential. Reading rooms, located in low income inner-city neighborhoods, are vibrant, separate spaces in a school packed full of popular and exciting books. Rooms are typically themed (e.g., a rainforest, a community garden) and are intended to support a culture of academic achievement in the school.



INTRODUCTION

This report presents key findings from an evaluation of the Carson Scholars Program and the Reading Room Project. Formative Evaluation Research Associates (FERA), an independent evaluation group, conducted this research (2010 to 2013) with support from a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant.

The Carson Scholars Program creates a pipeline of diverse young leaders who value giving back to their communities. Both initiatives:

- 1) Foster a culture that supports academic excellence in schools
- 2) Encourage young people to THINK BIG, which promotes outstanding academic achievement and a dedication to helping others. (For more information about Dr. Ben Carson's THINK BIG philosophy, see <http://carsonscholars.org/dr-ben-carson/think-big>)

FERA's research methods included: 1) surveys of current Carson Scholars (51% responded: 1,240 / 2,413); 2) surveys of all alumni (38% responded: 343/906); 3) surveys of Reading Room Coordinators (84% responded: 42/50); 4) surveys of principals of schools with Reading Rooms (50% responded: 21/42); 5) a case study of a Baltimore City school located in a low-income neighborhood with both Carson Scholars and a Reading Room; and 6) a pilot analysis of test scores for three schools with Reading Rooms.

CARSON SCHOLARS PROGRAM: KEY FINDINGS

In 1996 there were 25 Carson Scholars. Today there are:

- ♦ 5,700 Carson Scholars in 50 states and Washington, D.C.
- ♦ 2,718 schools with a Carson Scholars Program
- ♦ \$5.7M in scholarships awarded
- ♦ 450 colleges and universities with Carson Scholars attending

Carson Scholars mirror the diversity of our country in terms of race and ethnicity and socioeconomic levels. Youth from low-income urban neighborhoods and those from suburban and rural areas are celebrated together and are all called upon to think of themselves as community leaders.

Key Findings – Among Current Carson Scholars:

94% Think of themselves as role models for other students

77% Have increased their motivation to do well in school

“Being a Carson Scholar also means that I must work to set an example among my peers by working hard in and out of school. Knowing that I am a part of such a special group of scholars encourages me to do my best every day.” -Current Carson Scholar

Alumni say that being a scholar:

81% Increased their self-confidence

73% Strengthened their college application

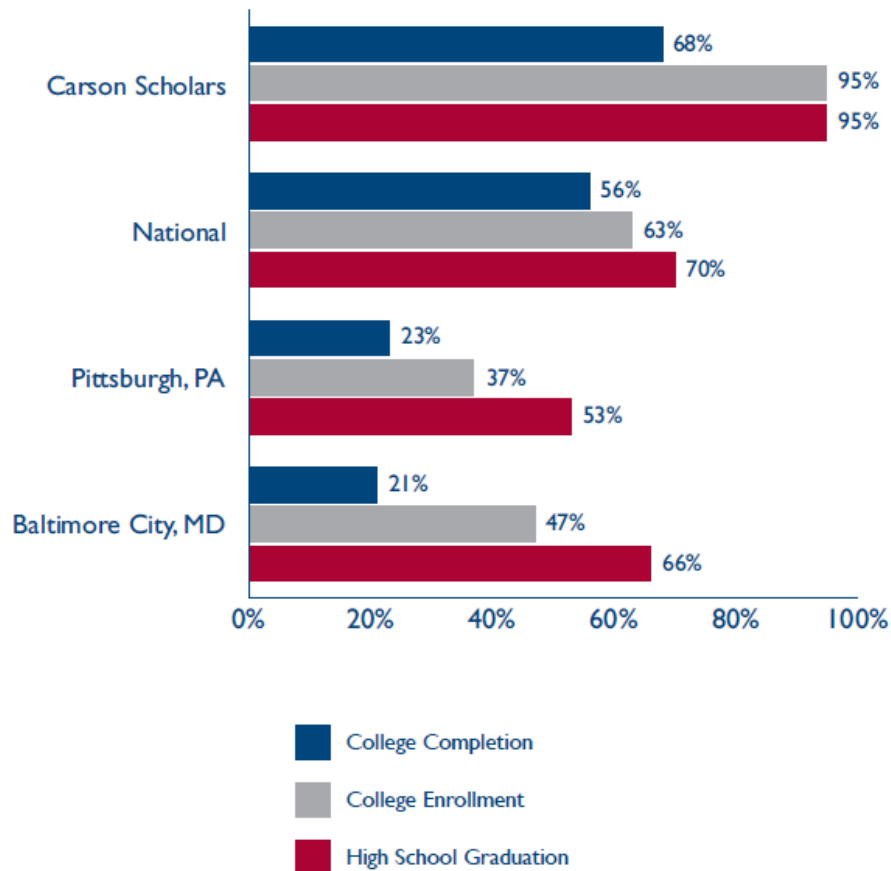
78% Encouraged them to apply for other scholarships to pay for college

42% Helped them to obtain other scholarships

45% Linked them to other opportunities

Based on this feedback, the Carson Scholars Fund developed new strategies to network alumni with each other and to other opportunities for growth and leadership.

Key Finding – Fully 95% of all Carson Scholars graduate from high school and attend college. They also graduate from college at a rate higher than their peers nationally.¹ This is significant in that when they first became Scholars, 98% lived in cities such as Baltimore, Battle Creek, and Pittsburg, where high school and college graduation rates are much lower than national rates.



¹ FERA obtained StudentTracker 2010 data for 100% of Carson Scholars alumni with high school graduation rates from May 1996 to May 2005 (n=345). This included college enrollment and completion rates as well as field of study and degree completed.

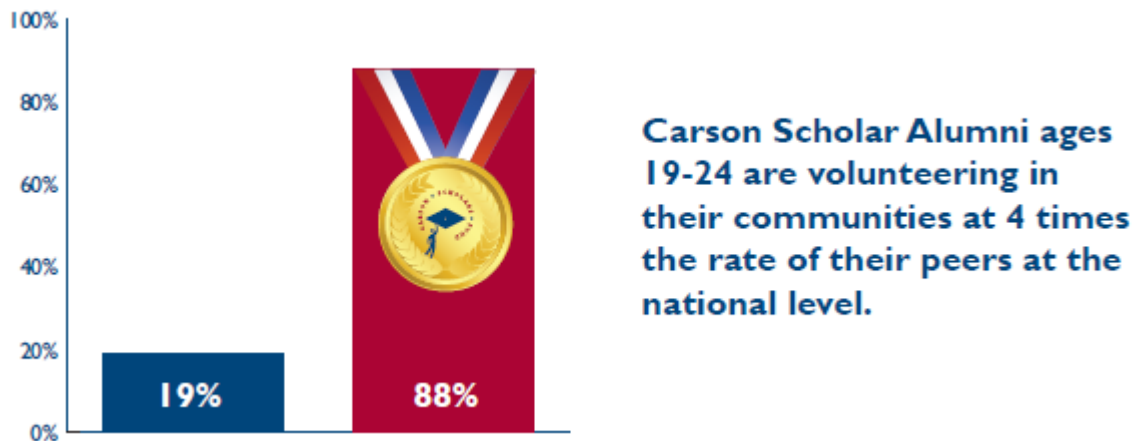


Key Finding – Close to half of Carson Scholar Alumni (162 out of 374) pursue STEM-related studies in college and graduate school.

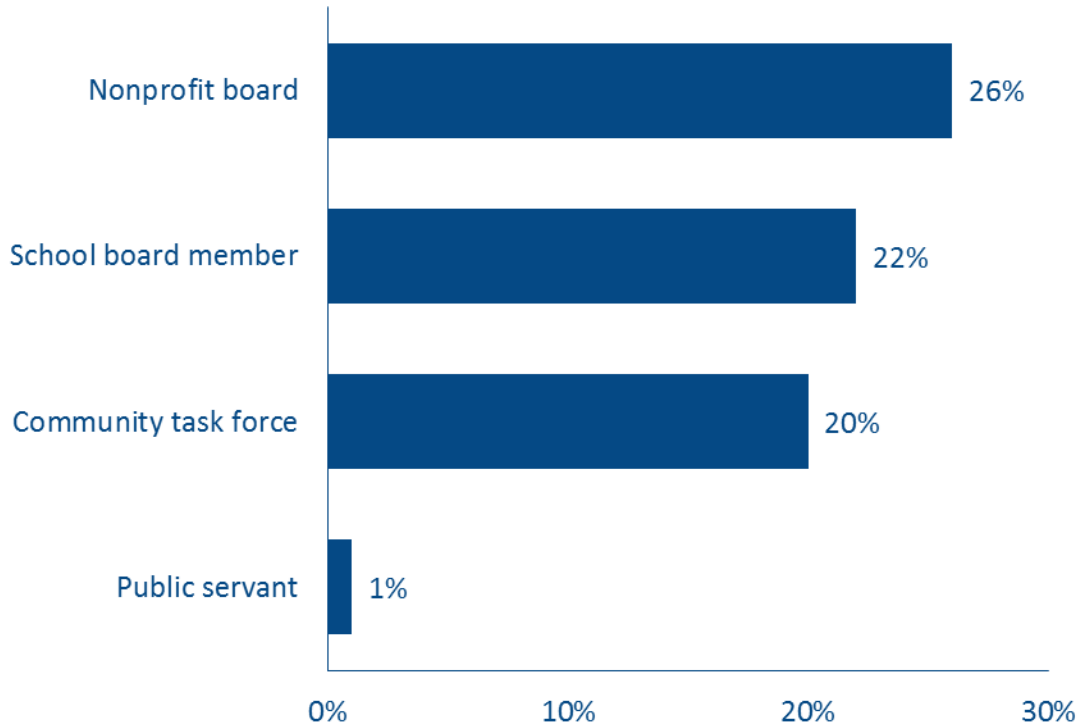
Areas of study include:

- STEM related - 43%
- Liberal/Visual Arts and Education - 33%
- Business/Finance - 10%
- Public Administration/Political Science – 6%
- Communications - 5%
- Law - 3%

Key Finding – Carson Scholar Alumni ages 19-24 are volunteering in their communities at four times the rate of their peers nationally. Three-quarters of the respondents (74%) indicated that becoming a Carson Scholar further increased their commitment to give back.



Key Finding – Carson Alumni are serving in leadership roles in the nonprofit and public sectors. This is impressive given that fully 93% of alumni are only ages 18-25. Most are still attending college.



Overall, the Carson Scholars Fund is achieving its goal to discover, recognize, and encourage young leaders. Carson Scholar alumni are moving toward achieving their full potential in their own lives. They also serve as leaders in their communities and contribute to society by volunteering their time and their talent, as well as mentoring other students.

“The Carson Scholarship taught me, at an early age, that I can achieve anything that I set my mind on. I always think about how great it was to be awarded at such a young age and being a part of something bigger.” -Carson Scholar



THE BEN CARSON READING ROOM PROJECT

“Students who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers. For the worst readers, those [who] couldn’t master even the basic skills by third grade, the rate is nearly six times greater.... What’s more, the study shows that poverty has a powerful influence on graduation rates. The combined effect of reading poorly and living in poverty puts these children in double jeopardy.”¹

Reading Rooms are located in low-income urban neighborhoods, which compared to wealthier neighborhoods, have less access to books and other opportunities for young children to gain literacy skills. Low income neighborhoods often have:

- ◆ Few places to purchase quality children’s books
- ◆ Minimal or no access to a public library
- ◆ Fewer signs or signs in disrepair or painted with graffiti
- ◆ Homes with few books
- ◆ A high percentage of adults who are functionally illiterate

A disproportionate number of African American and Latino children and those living in poverty or low-income households enter kindergarten without the five developmental areas that are known to affect well-being and school performance: 1) physical health and well-being; 2) social competence; 3) emotional maturity; 4) language and cognitive skills; and 5) communication skills and general knowledge.² Research shows that “by age 3, children in low-income homes will have heard one-third as many words as children in middle and high-income homes (10 million versus 30 million words).”³ These children start Kindergarten at a disadvantage.

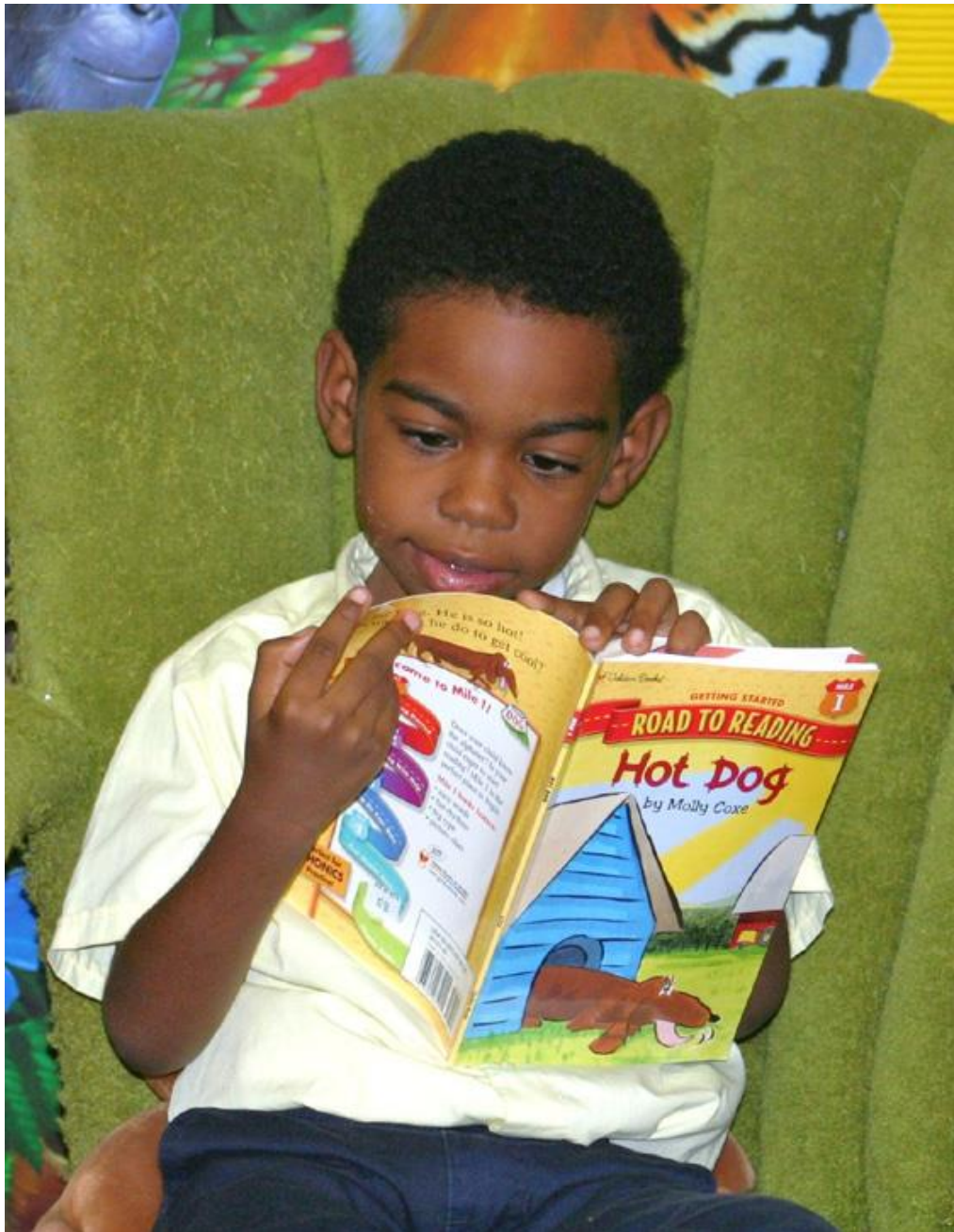
Ben Carson Reading Rooms are designed to beat these odds through supporting literacy and a love of reading. They are sponsored by individuals, businesses, and organizations with an interest in improving schools in their communities and are supported by Carson Scholars Fund staff at the national level.

² Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS) Early Development Instrument (EDI).

³

http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/EnsuringSuccessforYoungChildrenLiteracy/Ensuring_Success_Early_Literacy.pdf

A Ben Carson Reading Room is a special place in a school where students can read in an inviting, quiet, and secure environment. Reading Rooms contain at least 500 books initially and provide resources to continue purchasing books. The reading done in Ben Carson Reading Rooms is not part of any school curriculum, and is not used for the purposes of grading or assessing students' reading ability. Though the amount of time students spend in a Reading Room varies by school, in most of the schools (86%) fully 75-100% of students experience the Reading Room over the course of a school year.



Ben Carson Reading Rooms:

- ♦ Complement structured reading programs
- ♦ Offer choice and provide a wider range of reading materials than many schools have
- ♦ Highlight Dr. Carson’s own story of how reading opened the door to learning. He went from being a D student (“the class dummy”) to succeeding academically and, later, professionally. This narrative shows students, especially those who are struggling, a pathway to success.

Key Fact:

94 Reading Rooms are located in 12 states

Date	Number of Reading Rooms
2000 - 2004	n=17
2005 – 2009	n=44
2010 – 2013	n=33



OUTCOMES FOR SCHOOLS

Key Findings – Principals and coordinators identified the value of Reading Rooms for their schools. According to these professionals, Reading Rooms:

- ♦ **Provide space and time for students to cultivate a love of reading and learning.** They highlight that independent reading is important.

- ◆ **Add new books and other reading materials to schools with limited resources.** One coordinator explained, *“The library does not have the best selection of books for the students to read. The books that are in our Carson Reading Room offer exciting and entertaining material that grabs our readers’ attention.”* Another coordinator commented, *“The benefits are that every book in the Ben Carson Room is current and the variety so large. There is always something for every level and interest of a child.”*
- ◆ **Help to create a culture of high expectations and learning.** A coordinator said, *“The Reading Room is the intellectual hub of our school! We have changed our school's vision to ‘Work Harder, Think Bigger and Aim Higher’ It inspires them [teachers] to raise the bar for their students when it comes to reading expectations.”*
- ◆ **Serve as a valuable resource for teachers.** *“Teachers call it ‘The Think Tank.’ They meet there to use these resource books and students’ books of interest to guide them in planning wonderful lessons and challenge scenarios.”* Explained a school principal: in this way, the additional resources allow teachers, librarians, and reading specialists to use the Reading Room to enhance their classroom reading instruction.

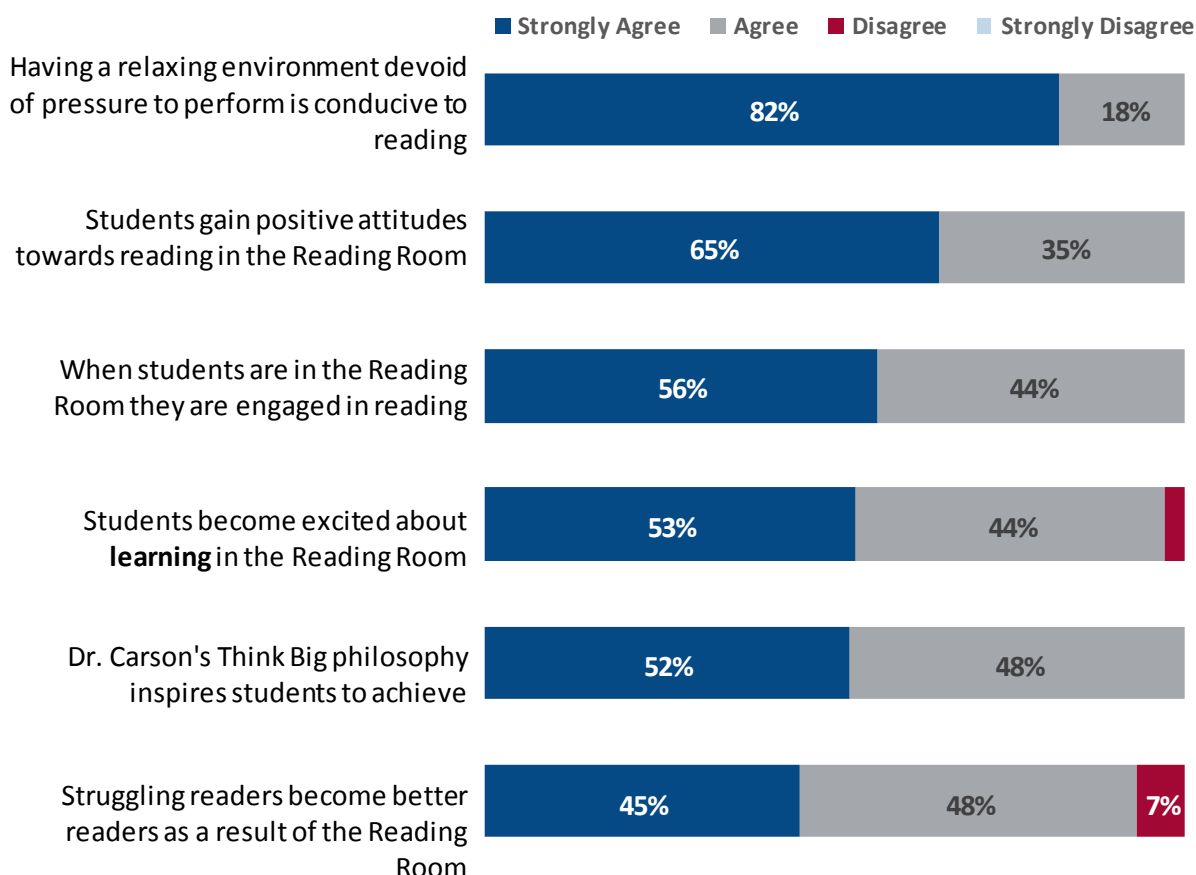
OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Carson Reading Rooms tell children the following story and help to make it a reality:

- ◆ Reading can open the world of learning and discovery
- ◆ Reading and learning help you be successful in school even if you are struggling now
- ◆ If you are successful in school you can go to college or do something in life that you are passionate about and excel in
- ◆ When you are successful in your own life, then you can give back to your community

Key Findings –Reading Room coordinators believe that student attitudes about reading and behaviors are positively affected by their experiences in the Reading Rooms. One coordinator commented, *“It supports the importance of independent reading as a lifelong skill. Students enjoy reading and don't view it as a school task.”*

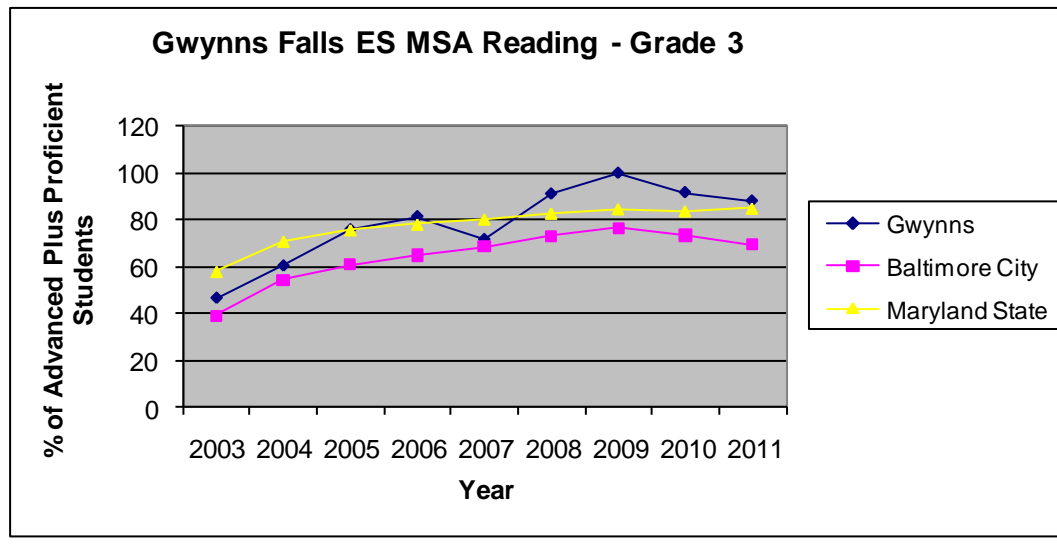
Reading Room Coordinators' Perceptions about the Impact of Reading Rooms on Student Motivation and Reading Achievement



Key Findings – Low-achieving students gain self-esteem and confidence with reading.

The impact of Ben Carson Reading Rooms on low-achieving students is particularly important since most Reading Rooms are located in high-need, high-poverty schools. Research tells us that students attending schools in wealthy neighborhoods tend to select books that challenge them and build their skills, while those in low-income neighborhoods do the opposite (Neuman 2012). This is an issue for the Carson Scholars Fund should seek to address both in its program implementation and when conducting further research.

Key Findings – Reading Rooms contribute to improved reading skills and reading test scores. 100% of the school principals surveyed agree that the Reading Room in their school has a positive effect on student reading test scores. A small pilot study of test scores in six schools with Reading Rooms further supports principals' perceptions. The data from Gwynn Falls Elementary School exemplified this trend.



FERA analyzed Maryland State Assessment (MSA) 3rd grade reading test score data from six schools between 2002 and 2010. The MSA is a standardized test administered to students throughout the state of Maryland. Each of these six schools installed Reading Rooms in 2006, providing at least three years of comparison data both before and after implementation of the Reading Room. The figure above presents the data from the Reading Room school demonstrating the greatest increase in reading scores.

In four out of six schools, 3rd graders performed below their Baltimore City peers on the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) three years before the Reading Room was implemented. Four years after the Reading Rooms opened, reading test scores were equal to or above Baltimore City scores.⁴

“The Reading Room is valuable because it provides an additional opportunity for students to read independently in a different setting and with greater resources. The small group setting and variety of reading material allow students to discover and engage in the type of books they enjoy that may not be available in the classroom. The Think Big philosophy supports academic achievement in our school because of its foundation.” - Reading Room Coordinator

4

Maryland State Assessment (MSA)

<http://www.mdreportcard.org/rschool.aspx?K=30AAAA&WDATA=school>



CONCLUSIONS

The Carson Scholars Fund is a pathway for youth leaders that starts with the nation's youngest students. Scholars serve as role models and mentors for their peers during elementary, middle, and high school, and continue to do so after they graduate. Fully 95% of all Carson Scholars graduate from high school and attend college. They also graduate from college at a rate higher than their peers nationally. Carson Scholar Alumni ages 19-24 are volunteering in their communities at four times the rate of their peers nationally. Even though most alumni are still attending college, they are already serving in leadership roles in the nonprofit and public sectors.

Reading Rooms, mostly located in low-income urban neighborhoods, provide schools with a literacy-rich environment. The Carson Scholars Fund's theory of change is that if

students enjoy reading and therefore spend more time engaged with books at a young age, they will gain the reading skills that are critically important for future academic success. Reading Room coordinators and school principals perceive multiple positive outcomes for students, including the positive effects on students' attitudes towards reading and their engagement with books through their experiences in the Reading Rooms. Low-achieving students gain self-esteem and confidence with reading. Further, a pilot study indicates that Reading Rooms are likely contributing to improved reading test scores. The extent to which Reading Rooms contribute to improved reading skills is an area that FERA will continue to address in the future.

Author: Karin E. Tice, Ph.D., President.

Formative Evaluation Research Associates (FERA), an independent evaluation group based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was selected to conduct a multi-year evaluation of the Carson Scholars Fund initiatives. For access to the complete reports visit <http://carsonscholars.org/about/publications> or contact the Carson Scholars Fund. *Funding for the evaluation was provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.*

**Carson Scholars Fund, Inc.
305 West Chesapeake Avenue, Suite 310
Towson, Maryland 21204
Phone: 410.828.1005
Fax: 410.828.1007**

Toll Free: 1.877.77DRBEN

**CONNECT WITH US: on Facebook
twitter@CarsonScholars**