

A Case Study of a Ben Carson Reading Room and Carson Scholars' Impact on a Baltimore City School

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a case study of a Baltimore City school that has both a Ben Carson Reading Room and Carson Scholars. **Ben Carson Reading Rooms** are the core of a national initiative designed to support literacy and a love of reading in students at schools located in low-income neighborhoods. The **Carson Scholars** initiative recognizes academic excellence in young students (4th – 11th grade) who also have strong humanitarian qualities. Both initiatives are designed to encourage the development of successful young leaders with a social conscience throughout the country. Both are supported by The Carson Scholars Fund, a national nonprofit located in Baltimore, MD.

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. Funding for the evaluation was provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Other evaluation activities have included assessment of both initiatives at the national level through: 1) online surveys with Carson Scholar alumni, Reading Room coordinators, and school principals; and 2) analysis of Carson Scholars' high school graduation rates, college attendance, and degree attainment.

This case study takes a deeper and holistic look at the impact of a Reading Room and the presence of Carson Scholars on a school and its students that are difficult to measure quantitatively. While case study findings cannot be generalized they can provide important insights and interpretations of a different nature from quantitative data. We also selected the case study methodology to inform future quantitative data collection.

Arlington Elementary/Middle School (Arlington School) was selected for the case study based on the following criteria: 1) a low-income urban school in Baltimore City; 2) a Reading Room present in the school for at least three years; and 3) a history of having Carson Scholars and having at least one Carson Scholar attending the school currently.¹

Case study data collection included:

- A one-day site visit to Arlington School
- Individual interviews with the school principal, librarian, English as a Second Language teacher, and a Carson Scholar
- Group interviews (8 students per group) with kindergarten, first grade, second grade and third grade students
- A short online survey with fifth grade students (N=103 respondents)

¹ Arlington School is unusual in that it has both a Reading Room and Carson Scholars. The school provided an opportunity to understand the potential for how they might work together to impact a school.

- Review of:
 - Background documents
 - The school profile
 - Reading assessment data

The rest of this report: 1) discusses why reading is important; 2) presents background information about Arlington School; 3) describes the Reading Room; 4) documents the Reading Room’s impact on the school; 5) describes Carson Scholars; 6) addresses the impact of Carson Scholars on the school; and 7) offers concluding remarks.

WHY READING IS IMPORTANT

“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.”²

The gap between proficient readers and struggling readers starts early and, without adequate interventions, persists. Children who start school and are not “ready to learn” tend to stay behind. A disproportionate number of African American and Latino children and children living in poverty or low-income households enter kindergarten without the social, emotional and academic skills they need to be ready to learn. This includes reading. “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 Attendance is often a challenge for these children. Those who repeat a grade are 30 percent more likely to drop out of school, and 90 percent more likely to do so if they repeat two grades. Students who do not complete their high school education are not prepared for post-secondary education and jobs that provide economic security. The implications of low-level student achievement for individuals and for society-at-large are many and far-reaching. Less educated individuals are more likely to have health issues, to be incarcerated and to consume more public resources. For example, 85 percent of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate.⁴

Habitual leisure reading directly increases all of the literacy skills that are necessary to reap the benefits of lifelong reading (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005). In addition to improving general literacy skills, higher levels of engagement in leisure reading are associated with increased achievement on traditional educational testing measures (Baines, 2009; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Flowers, 2005). Participation in leisure reading can help second-language learners gain fluency more quickly (Kelly, Kneipp, & Lee, 2009).⁵

2 Hernandez, Donald. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Annie E. Casey Foundation Report April 2011.

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

4 <http://www.begintoread.com/research/literacystatistics.html>

5 Full citations can be found in the 2012 Ben Carson Reading Rooms Evaluation Report

Nationally, too many children struggle with reading. Ben Carson Reading Rooms directly address the issue of poor reading readiness and achievement. The Reading Rooms initiative is described in a later section of this report.

ABOUT ARLINGTON SCHOOL

Arlington School is a Title 1 pre-K - 8 school located in a low-income Baltimore City neighborhood. The elementary school is a beautiful brick building; the middle school is housed in two large portable classrooms outside of the school. About 25% of the school's students come from outside of the neighborhood. Parents and grandparents who went to the school as children and have moved out of the neighborhood bring their children/grandchildren to Arlington School. The school has a good reputation. It is known for providing a safe and loving environment for students. Students all wear uniforms—yellow shirts and blue pants or skirts. The principal explains that wearing uniforms sets a tone that supports academic success. Some Arlington School parents have graduated from college; others have only a 7th or 8th grade education. Like many urban schools, Arlington School faces challenges such as lack of adequate resources including books, low attendance rates, low parent involvement, and many students with behavioral and mental health challenges.

Demographics¹ School profile 2010-2011 school year

Pre-K – 8 Title 1 school (612 students)
96% African American
2% Latino/Hispanic
1% Asian American
1% White

Key Facts (Pre-K – 6)²

90% Free and reduced price meals (2012)
83.2% Free and reduced price meals
16.63% Missed more than 20 days
12.42% Suspension rate
(includes middle school)
14% Special education students
30 Students speak English as their second language

1 Arlington School profile data for school year 2010-2011

2 Arlington School profile data for school year 2010-2011

Reading Test Scores

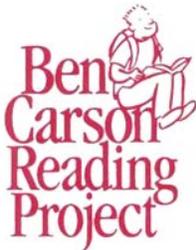
While this case study highlights the qualitative impacts of the Reading Room at Arlington School, it is of interest to note the changes in reading scores on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) taken by Arlington School third graders between 2009 and 2011. Table 1 shows the scores for Arlington School and for Baltimore City overall.

Table 1: Percentage of Third Grade Students Scoring “Proficient” or “Advanced” in Reading on the Maryland School Assessment

	2009	2010	2011
Arlington School	91.50%	93.05%	70.49%
Baltimore City	Unavailable	59.90%	60.57%

At Arlington School, a total of 70.49% (2011), 93.05% (2010), and 91.50% (2009) of third grade students scored proficient or advanced in reading on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA). In Baltimore City as a whole, third graders’ reading test scores were about 10% lower in 2011 and over 30% lower in 2010 as compared to Arlington Schools reading test scores. While a carefully executed test score comparison study is required to claim that the Reading Room affects test scores the data in Table 1 points to this conclusion.

BEN CARSON READING ROOMS: GENERAL



This case study provides a window into what Ben Carson Reading Rooms mean to urban schools and to the children who attend. Currently there are 85 Ben Carson Reading Rooms serving students in mostly low-income urban neighborhoods in 12 states, with another 12 Reading Rooms due to open in the 2012-13 school year. In Baltimore City, Reading Rooms are located in 24 public schools, in one private school, and in the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

The rooms are designed to foster literacy, promote leisurely reading, and encourage students and their families to recognize the importance of reading. They offer children a safe and engaging place to read for pleasure.

Reading Room goals are to:

1. Generate interest in reading and learning at an early age
2. Promote the “THINK BIG” philosophy⁶
3. Support a culture in schools where reading is valued

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

- Reading opens up the world of learning and discovery

6 “THINK BIG is Dr. Ben Carson’s philosophy that promotes outstanding academic achievement and dedication to helping others. Children, students, and adults have all found that when they THINK BIG, they are on their way to achieving their goals.” <http://carsonscholars.org/dr-ben-carson/think-big> T is for Talent/time: Recognize them as gifts, H Hope for good things and be honest, I Insight from people and good books, N Be nice to all people, K Knowledge: Recognize it as the key to living, B Books: Read them actively, I In-depth learning skills: Develop them, G Dr. Carson’s “G” is for God. Everyone has their own beliefs. When you THINK BIG, what does the “G” stand for in your life?

- 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 good at doing
- When you are successful in your own life then you can give back to your community

Imagine if every vulnerable child knew and believed this story and had the opportunity to make it reality.

ARLINGTON SCHOOL'S BEN CARSON READING ROOM

The Ben Carson Reading Room in Arlington School is one of the school's "bright spots." When the Reading Room opened 6 years ago, the school library had been closed for two years... resources were not available to hire a librarian. The school does not currently have a Reading Specialist.

General

The Reading Room is located in the Pre-K and Kindergarten hallway. There is a sign-up sheet in the hallway where any teacher in the school can reserve the room for their class. Children enter the room, pass a fountain, and walk through a rainforest archway. With its rainforest theme and the soothing sound of flowing water, the room is a quiet oasis. It may be the only time in the school day when children are not supposed to be on task, performing or being assessed. Couches, beanbag chairs, stuffed animals and shelves of books invite children to relax, to curl up with a book, and to read.

Special Focus on Kindergartners

Children entering school without being "ready to learn" is of concern at Arlington School as well as nationally. Arlington's principal sends kindergartners to the Reading Room regularly as a remedial effort to encourage reading. She said, "Too many of our kindergartners start first grade reading below grade level so we are starting to send our kindergartners to the Reading Room every week." The principal explained that many of the children are not read to at home. "Many of our kindergartners' parents are only 20 to 25 years old. This means that they were teens—ages 15 to 20 when their children were born." According to the principal, a high percentage of the teens are single mothers.



Different Experiences

Students' experiences in the Reading Room and the school library are very different. When students go to the library they have a task to complete such as researching a specific topic. Usually the librarian presents material to them. Students have very little time, if any, to select books. In contrast, in the Reading Room students are free to browse and select a book of interest.

IMPACT OF THE BEN CARSON READING ROOM ON ARLINGTON SCHOOL

The Ben Carson Reading Room, a unique space in Arlington School, supports literacy and an orientation to academic achievement at the school in eight key ways. It is:

1. A place where students can learn the connection between reading, learning and being successful in school. In the Reading Room students learn about Dr. Carson's life and how it embodies the connection between reading, learning and success in school. Teachers talk about Dr. Carson with the children. Some of the older students had read one of Dr. Carson's books, and others had seen the movie about his life. A large sign with Dr. Carson's "THINK BIG" expression greets students when they enter the room. One first-grade student commented, "Dr. Carson created this room so that we could learn to read and to help us pass to the next grade level." In each of the groups of children interviewed, this connection between reading and moving forward successfully in school was explained by one or more children without being asked. As one child explained the connection, the other children all nodded their heads, said something in agreement and/or echoed something that had already been said.



2. A place to experience the joy of reading and discovery. It offers a space where children can experience the joy of discovery and learning through books. The children are not following instructions to complete a task but are exploring on their own. Some of the comments students made while they were in the Reading Room were:

- "Look at what I found! It's in Spanish. I wonder what it says."
- "Look! Bugs are interesting...I don't want to touch them but look at this one."
- "Look at what I found! Let's read it."
- "You can learn about the world in this book (Geography of the world). Flipping through the pages...I wonder if there is a map...I am looking for Baltimore."

3. A place with a caring adult male role model to whom vulnerable children can relate. Dr. Carson believes that every student can succeed and sets expectations that when they do, they will give back to the world in their own unique way. He encourages students to find what they are passionate about and good at, whatever that may be. Entering the Reading Room, children are greeted by a large photo of Dr. Ben Carson’s warm, smiling and caring face. The children seem to feel his presence; they believe that he cares about them and about their success in life. Students interviewed spoke about Dr. Carson as if they knew him personally. They know his story, a powerful narrative about a path to a future that is different from what many of them hear and see in their homes and neighborhoods. They know that Dr. Ben is a successful African American man who was raised by a single mother in an urban environment similar to the one where Arlington is located. His life was transformed by reading. The kindergarten, first, second, and third grade children interviewed eagerly offered to share what they know about Dr. Carson:

- *“He was a brain surgeon and helps people... I want to be like him when I grow up.”*
- *“He couldn’t read at first, then he learned.”*
- *“He was a dum dum. Then he learned to read books and stopped being a dum dum and became smart.”*
- *“He had a hard life... He cares about us.”*

4. A place where children can dream about the future. The Reading Room has a large sign on the wall encouraging children to “THINK BIG.” With comfortable places to curl up, the Reading Room is space in the school where children can dream and can imagine possibilities. While this is important for all children, it represents hope for children living in households where there is little hope left. Poverty, lack of opportunity, low levels of literacy and high levels of incarceration have eroded some people’s ability to dream a different future for themselves and for their community. An example of this is a child who told the principal that all the adults in his household had been incarcerated at least twice. His mother recently told him that she was sure she would die before age 36. For a child living with adults who have lost hope, being inspired to think big and envision a different future can make all the difference. There is a large “Think Big” sign in the Reading Room. Each child interviewed was asked to explain what think big meant to them. Almost all of the students, even the kindergartners, understood the concept and could explain it.

Children learn to “THINK BIG”

What does “THINK BIG” mean to students?

It means that you have big dreams and you think you can do it.

- *“You can imagine it.”*
- *“You can do what you put your mind to.”*
- *“Going outside of the box and doing things I have never done before... being brave.”*
- *“To have great ideas...to think about the world and what others need.”*

Children interviewed at Arlington School have ideas about what they might like to do when they grow up. They said that would like to be: a baker, firefighter, teacher, nurse, doctor, college teacher, make games, a policeman, a ballerina, a vet, own my own restaurant, scientist, mentalist (help fix people's minds), a basketball player, go to college and be smarter than I am now, an illustrator, a math teacher, an artist, an apple seed man, to build things. One child said, "If I am rich, I will give half of my money to people who have cancer. I want to be just like Dr. Carson."

5. A space and opportunity for students to practice and enjoy reading without being assessed.

This is especially valuable for students who struggle with reading, as many of Arlington School students do. A teacher commented, "For struggling readers, reading often isn't fun for them. When they go to the Reading Room they experience reading as something fun to do." In the Reading Room, struggling readers are motivated to read. No matter what their age, it is okay for them to pick up a picture book, to listen to a story, or to follow along while another student reads to them. Students can read to a stuffed animal without being corrected or judged. They can choose what they wish to read in a relaxed and quiet atmosphere and can experience the pleasure of discovery. One eight-year-old girl who struggles with reading said, "Reading a book is like going on an adventure." Kindergarten and first grade children explained why they like to come to the Reading Room as follows:



- "I can learn to read by looking at books... the books pop out!"
- "I like reading... I can learn about interesting stuff in the books."
- "We talk about Dr. Carson."
- "We can pick from so many books. The Reading Room has different books than the library."
- "We need this room... it is where we can learn words and about animals and mysteries."

6. A quiet oasis. Children like the Reading Room because it is quiet. It is the only place in the school where children can relax. As one teacher commented, it is the only time in a student's day where "Nobody is talking to them... requiring them to finish something or to get in line." For children who experience the stress of living in poverty and of racism, and/or who live in chaotic, stressful home environments, this quiet, relaxed environment is especially valuable. In each group of children interviewed, multiple children said they liked the Reading Room because it was quiet. When this comment was offered, the rest of the children expressed agreement. Indeed, when the students were told they could go select a book, they went straight to the book shelves. Most found a book rather quickly and curled up to read. A few children were still exploring the shelves. With the exception of exclamations such as those described earlier, the room was very quiet.

7. A wide range of books representing different reading levels and genres. The Arlington School librarian has not had a budget to purchase new books for two years. In contrast, the Reading Room acquires new books annually. New books are donated to the school by various community groups and book warehouses. The Reading Room also has a small budget from the Carson Scholars Fund annually for book purchases.

8. A reinforcement of the college-going culture within the school. Adult interviewees all talked about how having a Reading Room contributes to a school culture where education is valued. All of the 25 kindergarten through third grade students interviewed raised their hands when asked if they planned to go to college. One third-grade boy explained, “We are all scholar friends... we may go to the same college together.”

Overall, the Arlington School Ben Carson Reading Room has had a significant impact on the school and its children, especially those in the early grades.

Challenges

The school faces two key logistical challenges with the Reading Room initiative. One challenge is that the school lacks enough volunteers to staff the room and is finding it difficult to recruit volunteers. The second challenge is that class sizes in the upper elementary and middle classrooms have increased in the last several years, becoming too large for all classmates to be in the Reading Room at one time. Sending students unaccompanied and without supervision has not been an option. The school plans to solve this problem by taking the Reading Room activity to the older students’ classrooms using wheeled book carts. Younger students will continue to use the Reading Room. Parents and grandparents will be invited to read with their children during reading night. Middle School students will have opportunities to earn service hours by reading to younger students.

CARSON SCHOLARS FUND: OVERVIEW

The Carson Scholars Fund is one of a number of programs that recognize excellence in scholarship around the country. What makes the Carson Scholars Fund different is the age of the recipients. Students in 4th–11th grades are eligible to be nominated by their schools to apply to be a Carson Scholar. The Carson Scholars Funds’ 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 was developed in the hope that a) celebration of academic achievement through the presence of Carson Scholars at a school will contribute to the school’s culture of academic success, and b) early recognition for high achieving students who care about their communities will support the development of future leaders.

Students in grades four through eleven become Carson Scholars by being nominated by their schools to participate in a competitive selection process. They complete an application and

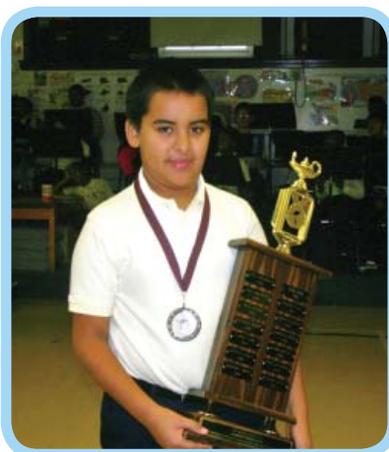
write an essay. Each year the winners are chosen by a panel of impartial judges comprised of teachers and educators using a standard set of criteria.

First-time Carson Scholars receive recognition at one of the regional banquets held annually. While the Carson Scholars Initiative is not a scholarship program, scholars do receive a \$1,000 scholarship to be applied toward their college education. Their scholarship is invested and earns interest, which students also receive when they are ready to use the money for college. Scholars also receive a certificate and a medal, similar to an Olympic medal, which they can wear around their necks, or display to remind them of their achievements. Scholars are also recognized at their school. Schools with one or more Carson Scholars receive a large trophy that has the names of Carson Scholars engraved on it to display in the school.

Students who are selected to be Carson Scholars benefit in many ways including: increased motivation to succeed, reception of additional awards, recognition and other opportunities. Being a Carson Scholar increased their commitment to give back. Out of 133 alumni surveyed 26% serve on nonprofit boards, 22% on school boards and 20% on community task forces. Alumni ages 19-24 volunteer in their communities at four times the rate of their peers at the national level – 88% as compared to 19% (Tice 2012).

ARLINGTON SCHOOL CARSON SCHOLARS: DESCRIPTION AND IMPACT

Arlington School had its first Carson Scholar awarded in 2001. Annually, Arlington’s Instructional Support Team members talk to all of the elementary school children about applying to become a Carson Scholar. They discuss what it means to be a scholar and about the application process. Three applications are selected for submission to the Carson Scholars Fund for consideration. Students hear about Carson Scholars a second time when the school’s winning Carson Scholar is announced. **In total, Arlington School has had 11 Carson Scholars who received scholarships; one of the eleven was recognized for continued academic achievement. Four students were in 4th grade, six in 5th, and one in 6th grade when they first became Carson Scholars.** Recognition of student scholars in lieu of a subsequent scholarship began in 2010 as a way to extend the opportunity to become a Carson Scholar to more students. Arlington school had a Carson Scholar every year, with the exception of one, since 2001.



Last year, Arlington’s first Latino student was selected as a Carson Scholar. This scholar’s English as a Second Language teacher nominated him because he “goes above and beyond and sets a great example for other students. His work ethic is “awesome.” When a Carson Scholar is selected, a big announcement is made school-wide in celebration of their achievement. The student’s name is also added to the Carson Scholar trophy prominently displayed in the school’s main office. One student commented, “the adults like to go into the office and look at the trophy.” The principal congratulates and attends the Carson Scholar banquet with each Scholar.

Only 12% of the 103 Arlington School 5th graders surveyed knew that there was a Carson Scholar at their school. Table 3 shows the responses of those 13 students to the question “What does having a Carson Scholar in the school mean to me?”

Table 3: What does having a Carson Scholar in this school mean? (n=13)*

Makes me think about college (13)
Reminds me to study hard (12)
Makes me “think big” about my future (11)
Makes me proud of my school (9)
Gives me someone to look up to (Dr. Carson) (7)
Gives me someone to look up to (Carson Scholars) (5)
Makes me think about giving back to my community (4)

* Students could select more than one response

Case study findings suggest two primary positive impacts of being a school with a history of Carson Scholars on the school.

1. Supports a college-going culture. Having Carson Scholars in the school is an opportunity for Arlington School to get students to think about their future in a new way. The principal commented that some of the students’ parents can’t see that far down the road, and many parents don’t talk to their children about the future. Being a Carson Scholar school supports a college-going culture within the school, complementing the messages that students receive in the Reading Room. Almost all of the 13 fifth-graders who were aware of the Carson Scholars at school indicated that having a Carson Scholar in the school reminds them to study hard, makes them think about college, and makes them “think big” about their future. One student who is a Scholar commented, “I think having a Carson Scholar in this school is important because it encourages other students to apply and work hard. I am a Carson Scholar so I think my job is to encourage is to tell other students to apply themselves.”
2. Contributes to Arlington’s positive reputation. Arlington School’s history of having had Carson Scholars adds to its credibility as a quality school. As the principal explained, in Baltimore City, families have a choice as to where they send their children to school. She went on to say that Arlington, being a Carson School, is a point she makes to parents. One student commented, “It makes our school looks good.” Another wrote: “The Carson Scholarship is a big privilege for ARLINGTON.”

CONCLUSIONS

Both the Ben Carson Reading Room and having Carson Scholars contributes to Arlington School’s reputation as an academically-focused school with a college-going culture. According to the principal, both initiatives motivate parents to want their children to attend this school.

The Ben Carson Reading Room had the following impacts on the school:

- A place where students can learn the connection between reading, learning and being successful in school
- A place to experience the joy of reading and discovery
- A place with a caring adult male role model to whom vulnerable children can relate
- A place where children can dream about the future
- A space and opportunity for students to practice and enjoy reading without being assessed.
- A quiet oasis
- A wide range of books representing different reading levels and genres
- Supports a college-going culture within the school

Arlington School, being known as a Carson Scholar school contributes to the school's reputation as a quality school with a college-going culture. The Carson Scholars Fund could increase the impact of Scholars on schools by incorporating some of the Reading Room practices. Most of the schools across the country have either a Reading Room or a Carson Scholar. Very few have both. In schools without a Reading Room, the Carson Scholars Fund could provide: 1) information to teachers so that they can talk to students about Dr. Carson; 2) Dr. Carson's books to school libraries so that students can read his story; 3) the video of his life; 4) a photograph of Dr. Carson so that he is "present" in schools; and 5) "THINK BIG" banners. These are all ways to expand the impact of Carson Scholars to an entire student body. In addition, the Carson Scholars Fund could partner with an organization such as Learning to Give to connect schools to philanthropy and education resources that teach giving and civic engagement. Dr. Carson's story could be woven into some of these resources and expand what it means to be a Carson Scholar school. Carson Scholar alumni and others could develop resources to incorporate into existing curriculum focused on development of youth leadership skills and abilities. Community foundation youth philanthropy initiatives across the country could be a partner in this effort.

Leadership development initiatives at the college level are expanding rapidly across the nation. The Carson Scholars Fund initiatives could be more intentional about preparing our younger citizens with leadership skills and abilities. Expanding the focus from the scholar to the school where there is no Reading Room, could be a powerful strategy to extend the impact of the initiative far beyond individual scholars. The Carson Scholars Fund has begun to create a strong pathway for the development of youth leaders, by starting with the nation's youngest students.