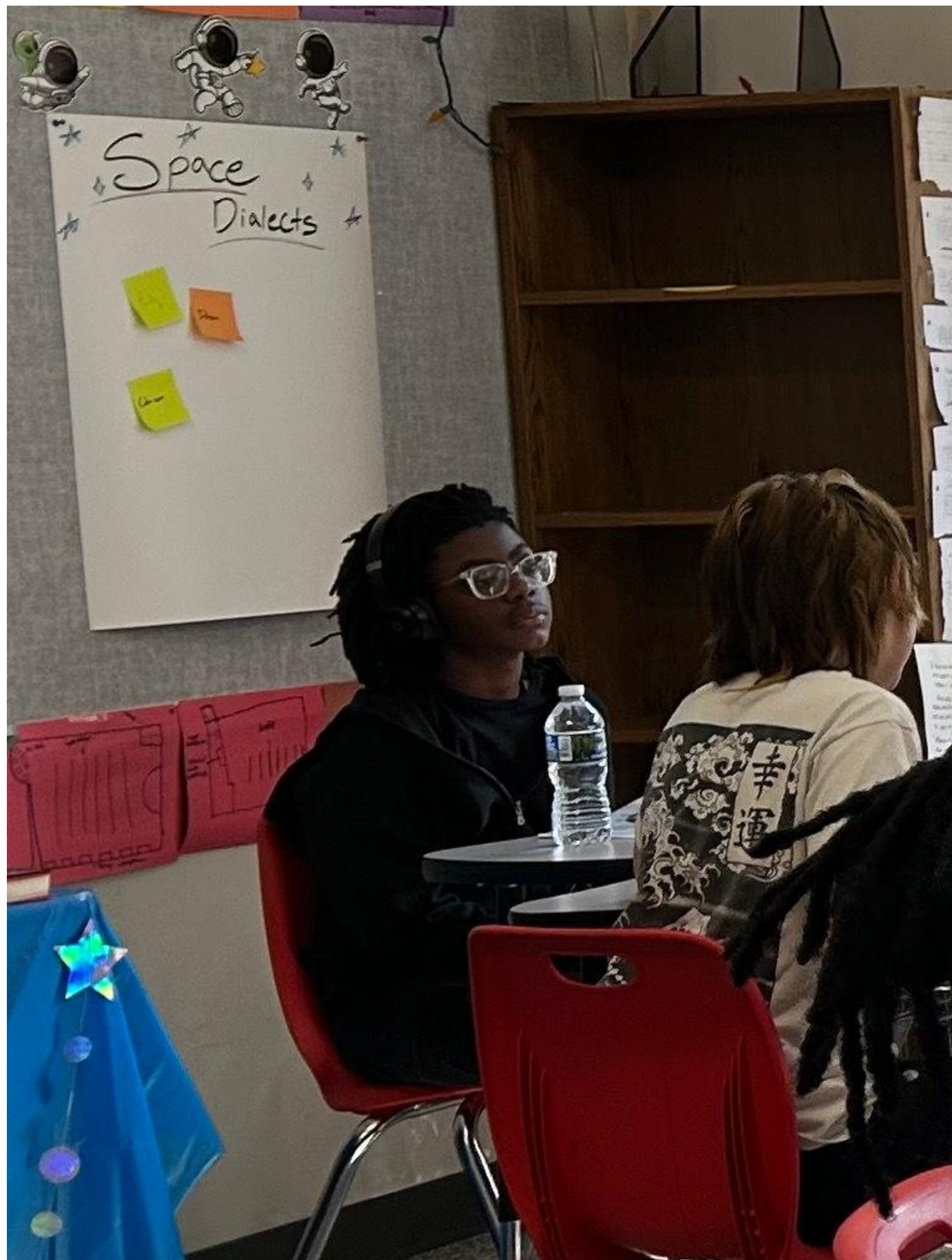


Alton Freedom School Boosts Reading and Helps Students Find Their Voice

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON/EDWARDSVILLE - If you ask any Freedom School student, they'd agree that the experience has improved their reading — but it's been about much more than just books.

This summer, Alton Middle School students could participate in Freedom School, a supplemental literacy program that encourages reading and social activism. SIUE students taught 50 incoming sixth, seventh and eighth graders how to use their voices through books about social justice.

“It's evolved into something that's bigger than all of us now,” said Brian Zurek, an AMS teacher who oversees Freedom School. “We're trying to teach them that they have a voice and an appropriate way to use their voice. We're trying to teach that it might just be one voice now, but if we get a whole bunch of voices together, we make a difference.”

For six weeks throughout the summer, the students come to Alton Middle School every morning for this supplemental learning experience. They start the day with “Harambe,” a meeting where they sing motivational songs and welcome a guest reader. This guest reader is usually a community leader who reads a picture book that resonates with them.

The students then divide into their groups, led by the SIUE students. They read, write and talk about social justice.

This week, for example, they are focusing on the National Day of Social Action's 2026 theme centered on childhood mental health. Last year, they wrote letters to legislators about public education and held a peaceful protest on SIUE's campus. They regularly take field trips and have group discussions about different issues.

Students have read books about gun violence, African American leaders and several other topics. Zurek noted that all of the books are “culturally relevant and culturally responsible.”

“That's the fun part about Freedom School to me, that you can start these conversations that are usually just so very vulnerable,” said Neshay Sanders, one of the SIUE students. “I love the fact that the books open up the ability to have that conversation comfortably and for kids to feel vulnerable in a class to be able to talk about what they know and what they don't know. And then we can learn more together.”

Freedom School was born out of Freedom Summer in 1964. It started as a way to supplement the learning of Black children who were receiving subpar educations in the segregated schools.

Marian Wright Edelman, a civil rights activist and first Black woman to pass the bar exam in Mississippi, created the Children's Defense Fund, which funds Freedom School across the country to this day. Zurek and Sanders agree that Alton is "lucky" to have a Freedom School program in the Riverbend community.

This program was started in Alton by SIUE students three years ago. Alton students have bought in, with impressive participation and attendance levels.

Zurek noted that it's "really rewarding" to see the students come back and do more every week. He recently received a letter from one student who said they felt "safe" at Freedom School.

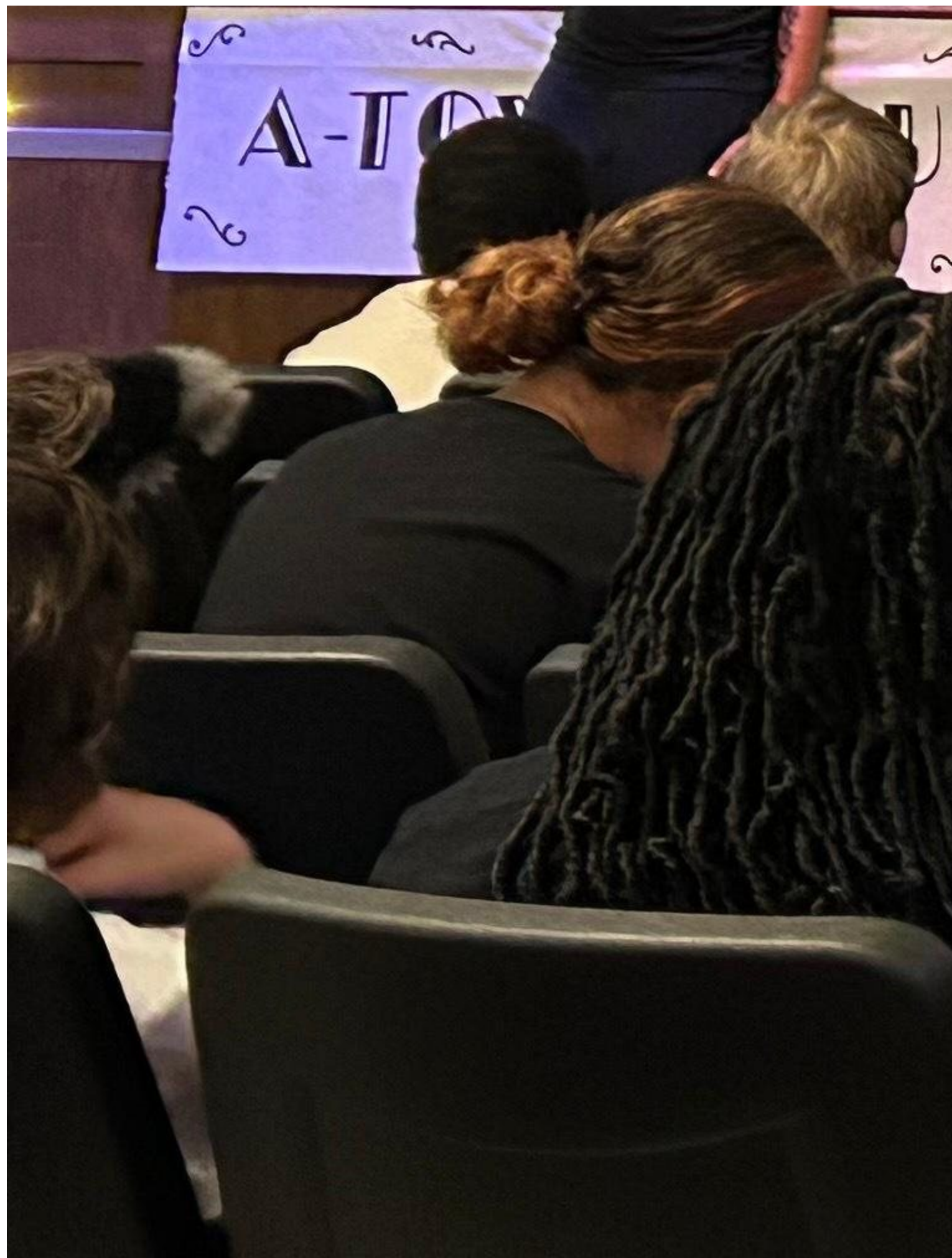
"It's fulfilling that they feel that they're accepted here," Zurek said. "That's what we're really about: building that community and building that family."

Sanders agreed and added that she hopes to do more work with kids after she graduates in December. She is proud to see the students becoming well-read, well-rounded people.

"We're trying to grow leaders," she said. "We're trying to teach the kids to speak up for themselves, especially when it comes to different issues that they may have, whether it's race or whatever the case may be. They practice that here. They speak up for themselves and they communicate well. We've seen so much growth."











OUR DAILY SCHEDULE

8:00-8:30 Breakfast

8:30-9:00 Homeroom

9:00-10:00 Language

(MVC)

10:30-11:00 English

11:00-11:30 Art

11:30-12:00 P.E.

12:00-1:00 Lunch

1:00-2:00 Afternoon

2:00 Dismissal

2:30 Dismissal

