



*A Holistic Approach to Elementary Education: Integrating Character  
Development into Literacy-Based Activities*

**Opportunity to Succeed Program  
3<sup>rd</sup> Grade American Dream Reading Camps**

Summer 2016 Report



## Inspiring the American Dream Foundation's Opportunity to Succeed Program

### Mission

*Inspiring the American Dream Foundation* has been established to help inspire children and young adults to achieve the American Dream, a set of ideals in which freedom, ability and virtue provide the opportunity for prosperity, happiness and upward mobility, regardless of race, ethnicity or social class. By engaging children of all ages, nationalities and backgrounds with an appreciation for the ideals, values and virtues inherent in the American Dream, the Foundation will help prepare students across the country to become independent, prosperous and productive members of society.

The organization has been established around 3 guiding principles:

- **Teach** students about the American Dream, while making the learning experience fun and interesting.
- **Share** with students the necessary skills and character traits to achieve their American Dreams.
- **Empower** students by helping them to visualize their personal American Dream journeys.

Inspiring the American Dream Foundation's *Opportunity to Succeed Program* incorporates these principles into 3 pillars of service, ***skills improvement, character development and career awareness***. The program's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade curriculum, introduced in the Spring of 2015, focuses on developing literacy skills and character traits essential for helping young, South Carolinian students to succeed in school, the work place and ultimately society at large.

### **Opportunity to Succeed American Dream Reading Camps**

#### **A.R. Lewis Elementary School Spring 2015 Pilot**

Funded through a grant provided by *Dabo's All In Team Foundation*, Inspiring the American Dream Foundation launched its *Opportunity to Succeed Program* in the Spring of 2015 as an After-School Reading Camp for a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at *A.R. Lewis Elementary School* in Pickens, South Carolina.

The camp was administered in sixteen, two-hour sessions by 3 certified elementary school teachers and 2 teacher / technology-aides. Reading materials (mentor texts and independent reading books) used in the program focused on American contemporary and historical figures that relied on character traits such as perseverance and self-control to achieve their dreams. Students were encouraged to make connections between the featured characters' traits and their own personal behaviors and to apply what they learned to real-world situations, enabling them to realize the vision that the American Dream is achievable.

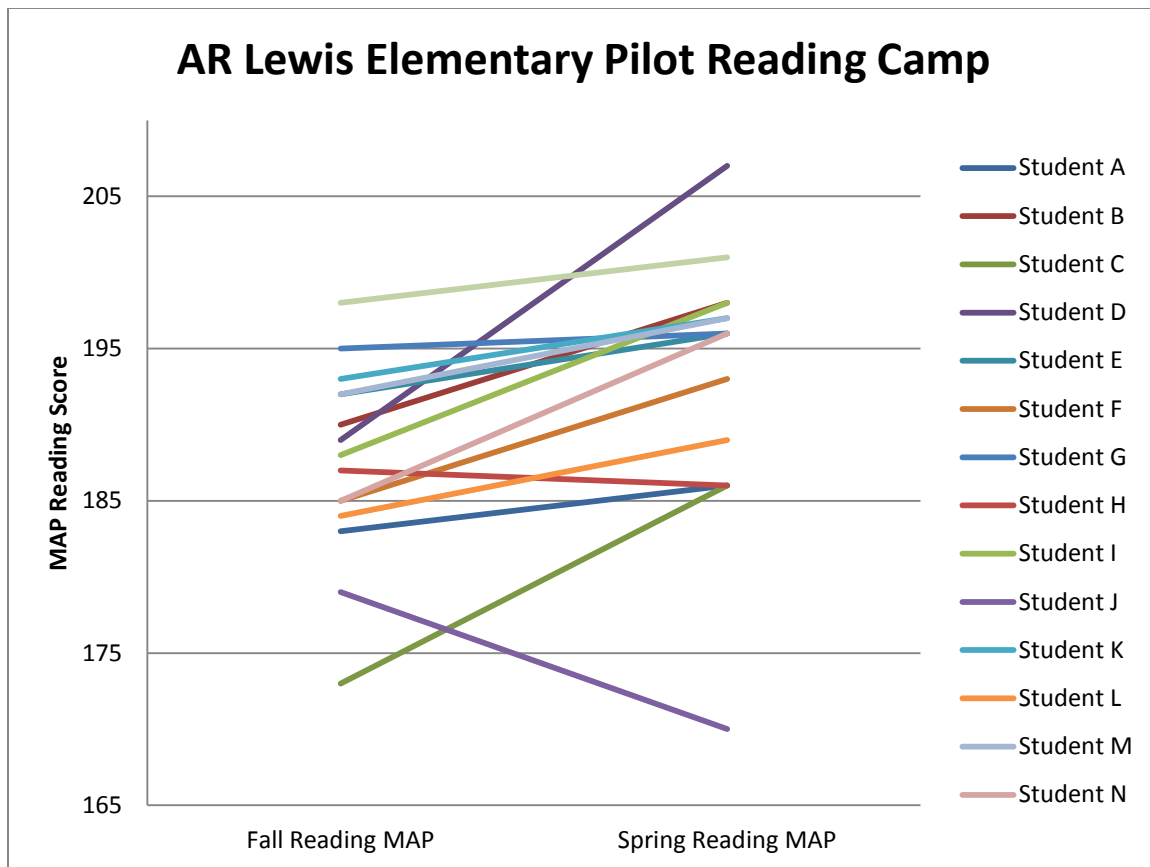


The students demonstrated mastery of the program through teacher-led mentor text discussions, student-facilitated activities, table-top book presentations and research, development and production of iMovie-based American Dream projects. Both quantitative (MAP-reading scores) and qualitative (student-, parent- and teacher-reported outcomes) data were used to measure the program’s impact. Teachers recorded their reflections at the end of each session on class management, facilitated reading and student project engagement to adjust future sessions and modify future programs. Additionally, at the conclusion of the camp, the teachers, aides and principal provided feedback and recommendations for improving the program’s ability to meet its objectives.

**2015 Pilot Results**

***Quantitative Results***

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reading scores were used to provide a quantitative measure of students’ reading improvement. A 3 point increase in a MAP-reading score is considered meaningful improvement. The 15 pilot students at AR Lewis Elementary had a median score of 188 at the start of the program and a median score of 196 at the completion of the program.





Individual changes for 12 of the 15 students (80%) demonstrated positive meaningful improvement (a change of 3 or more points) with one exception. Several students achieved an improvement of 10 or more points indicating more than 1 grade reading level improvement.

### **Qualitative Results**

Upon conclusion of the camp, students, parents, and teachers were asked to complete questionnaires that solicited their narrative input on the value of the program. Campers were asked to comment on their favorite American book character, their favorite aspect of the program and what the program taught them about themselves as both a reader and a learner. Parents and educators were asked about the students' motivations, behaviors and their overall assessment of the program. They were also asked to measure the impact of the program on a Likert scale as it related to addressing the domains of the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*.

#### ***Camper/Student-Reported Outcomes:***

- Students expressed their excitement about attending the Reading Camp and were enthusiastic about reading.
- Students were able to describe and independently use the reading strategies that they learned.
- Students connected with the American characters featured in mentor texts (*e.g., Shoeless Joe Jackson, Wilma Rudolph, Michael Jordan, and Abraham Lincoln*)
- Students enjoyed researching and communicating their American Dream through the use of iMovies.
- Students worked together and encouraged each other in pairs or as a team.
- Students were very motivated to research and to achieve their American Dream.

#### ***Parent- and Teacher-Reported Outcomes:***

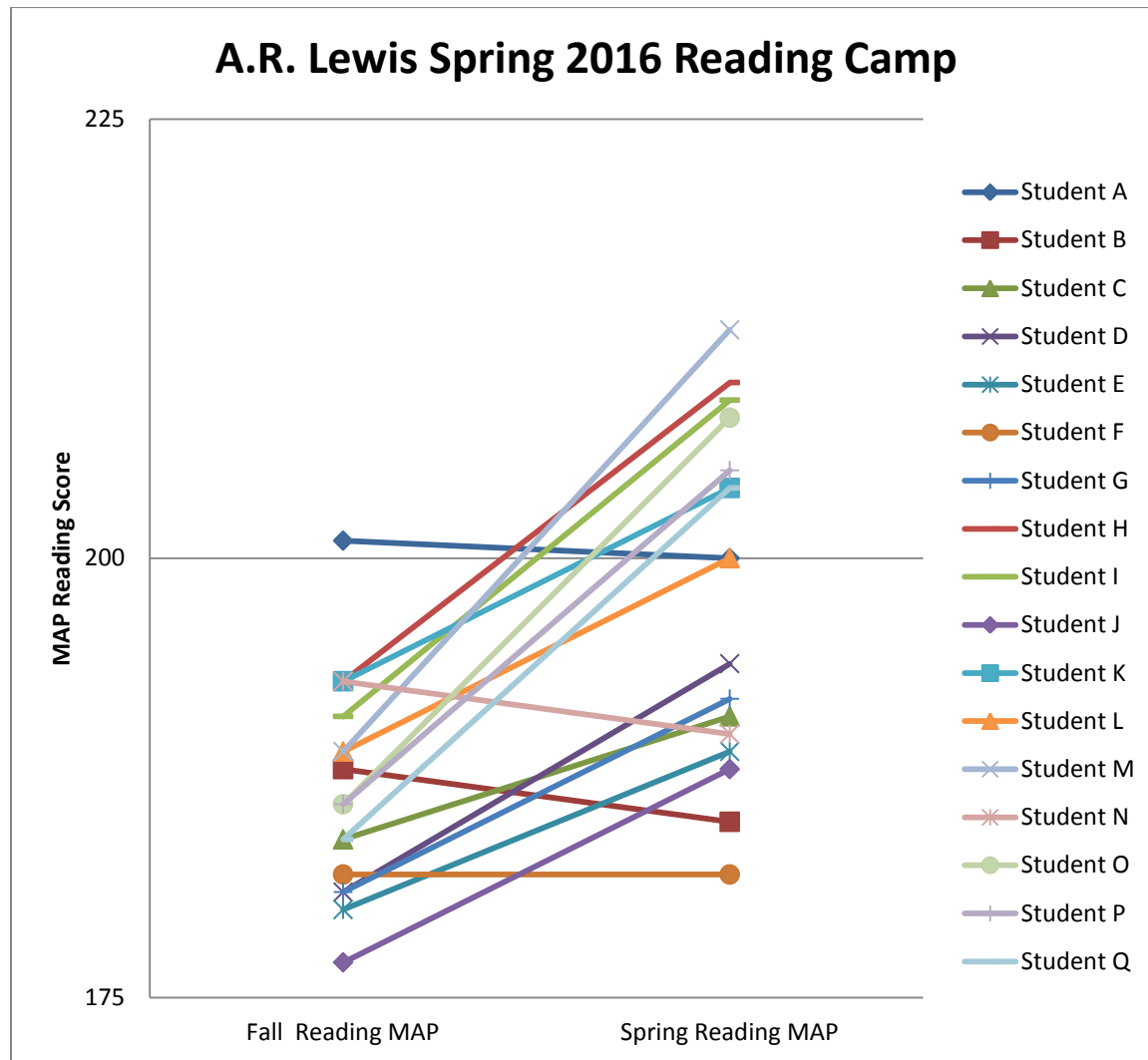
- Favorable assessments on life skills improvement including innovation, teamwork, critical thinking and communication (use of technology).
- Favorable assessments on character development including initiative, perseverance, hard work, motivation, team work and integrity.
- A noted improvement in self-confidence and leadership, particularly in students who were reticent and withdrawn in classroom and home settings.

### **A.R. Lewis Elementary School Spring 2016**

Building upon the success of its pilot program, Inspiring the American Dream Foundation administered a second camp at A.R. Lewis Elementary School in the Spring of 2016. The curriculum for the camp was modified slightly by introducing weekly, teacher facilitated discussion topics around the concept of the American Dream; working together as a team; and the importance of developing positive character traits and how they can help shape one's future. In order to accommodate the discussions, fewer mentor texts were used, while still maintaining the independent reading component of the program.

***Reading Development***

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reading scores were once again used to provide a quantitative measure of students' reading improvement. A 3 point increase in a MAP-reading score is considered meaningful improvement. Comparable to the pilot program, the 17 students who completed the camp had a median score of 186 at the start of the program and a median score of 200 upon its completion.



Individual changes for 13 of the 17 students (76%) demonstrated positive meaningful improvement with 11 of the 13 having achieved an improvement of 10 or more points, indicating more than 1 grade reading level improvement, 3 of which had improvements of 20 or more points.

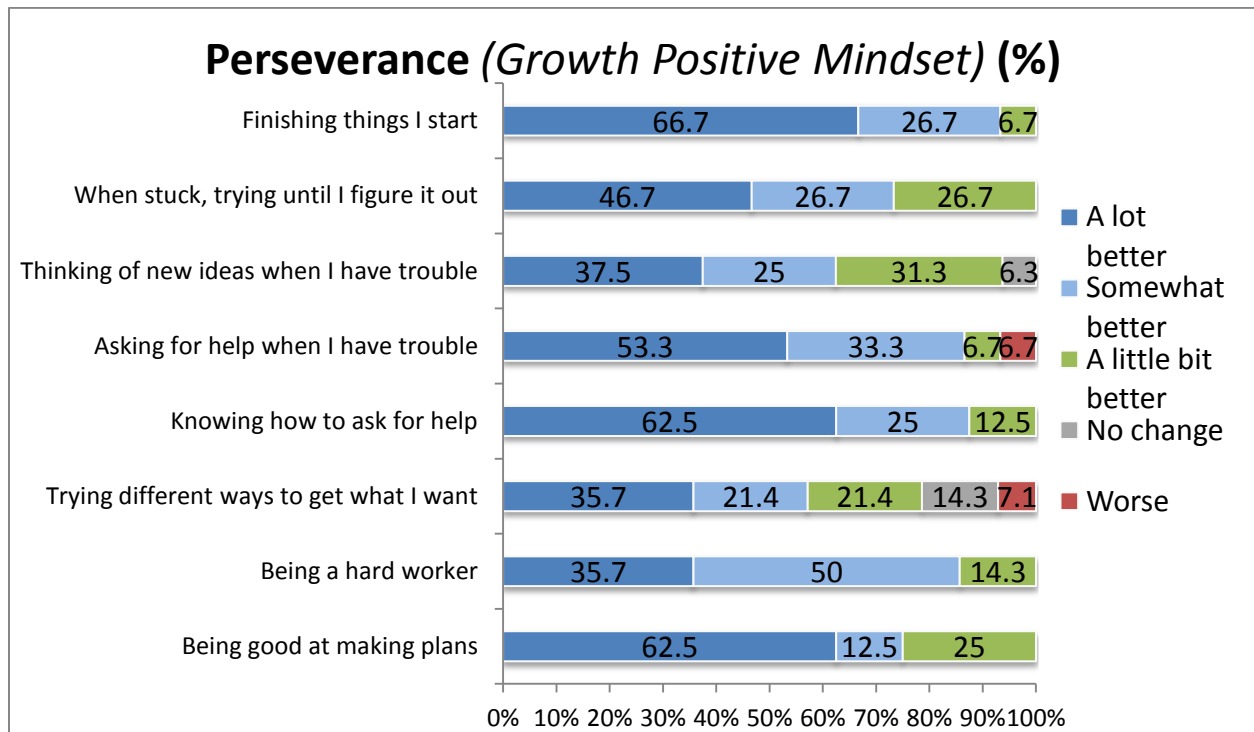
**Character Development**

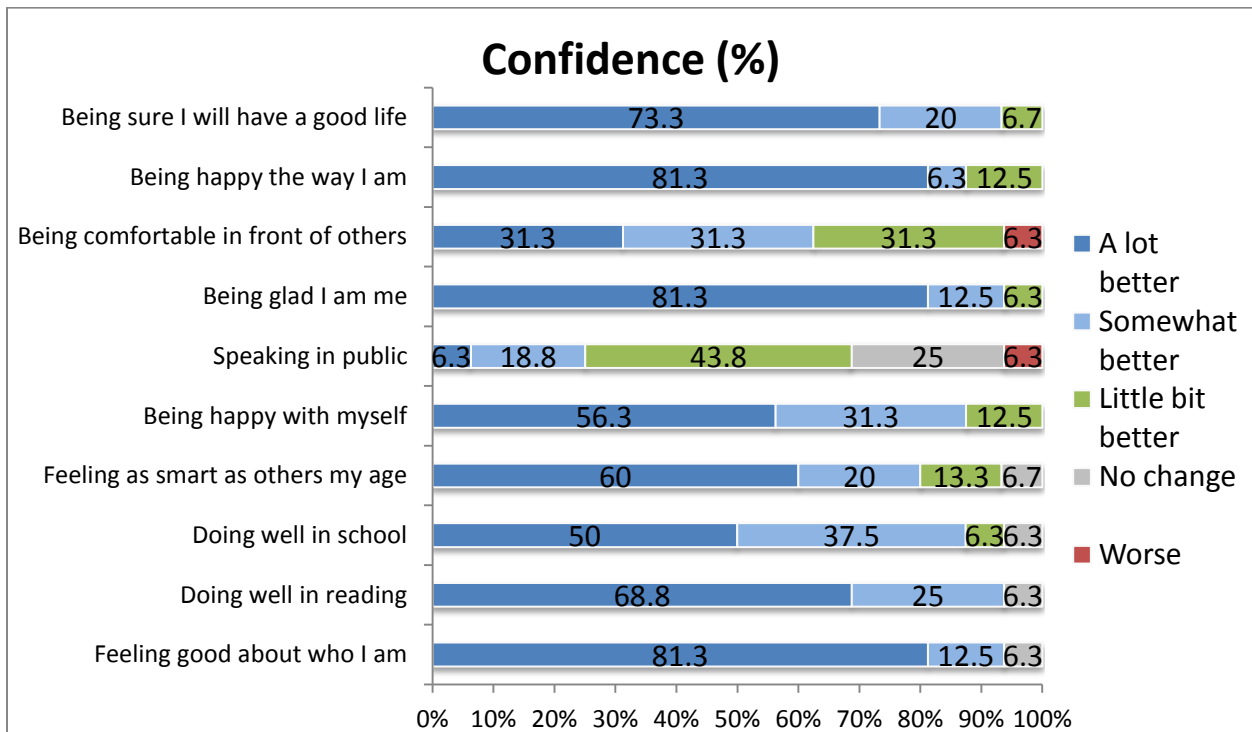
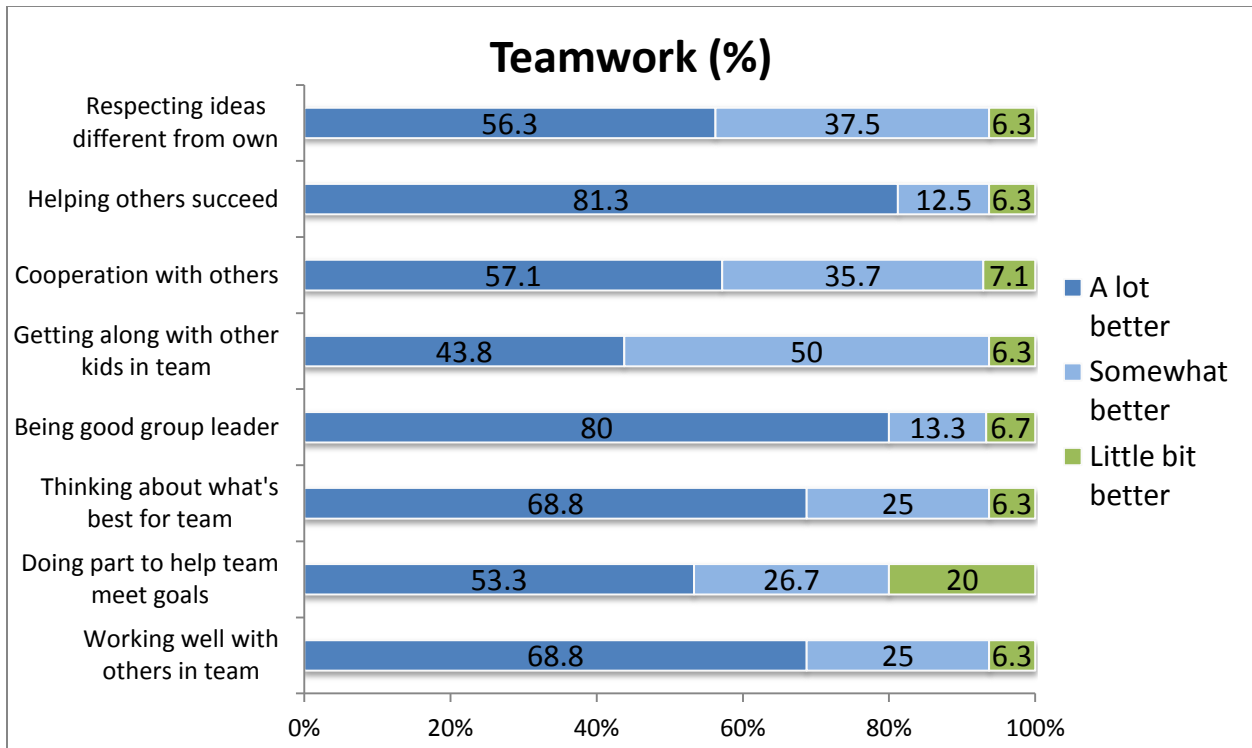
In an effort to develop a more formal process and valid multidimensional metric for assessing these important life skills and character traits (‘soft’ skills), Inspiring the American Dream Foundation collaborated with Dr. Edmond P. Bowers, Assistant Professor, Youth Development Leadership, at *Clemson University’s College of Behavioral, Social and Health Sciences*.

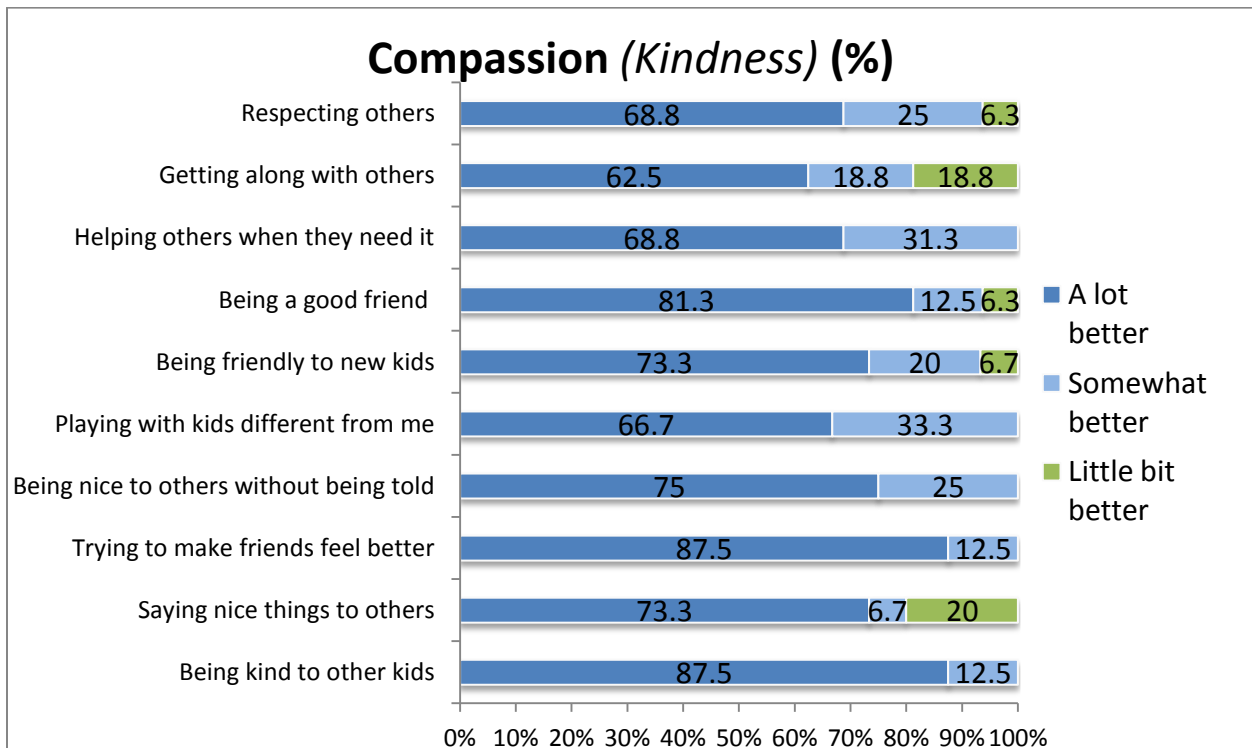
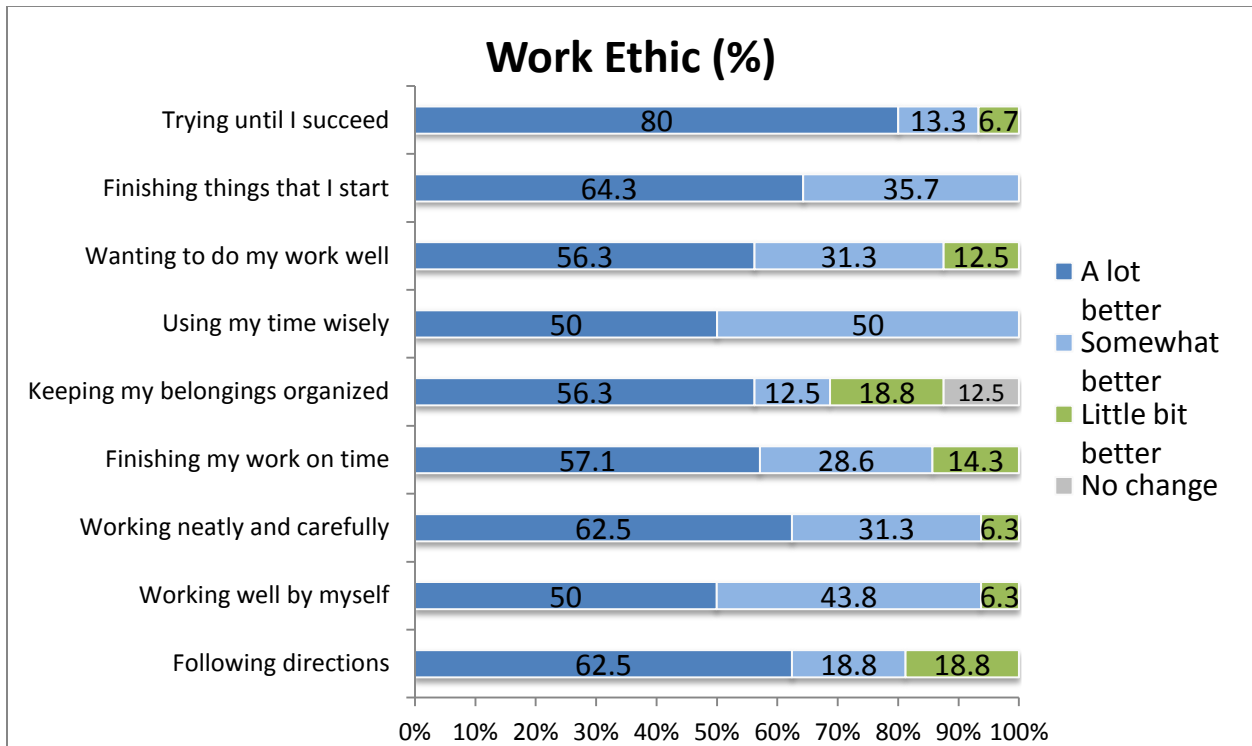
At the end of the sixteen week program, participating students were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire, asking them about how their experiences in the Reading Camp had changed them. Focusing on the relevant domains from the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*, the questions were developed to elicit feedback around learned skills and traits including *perseverance, confidence, work ethic, teamwork, and kindness*.

What makes this study noteworthy is that the 2016 Reading Camp was held against the backdrop of a community-wide effort to prevent the closing of several local elementary schools, including A.R. Lewis Elementary. Although their school was eventually closed due to budgetary reasons, campers reported growth in some valuable life skills and lessons during this very tempestuous period.

Below are a series of charts detailing the students’ experiences as a result of participating in the Reading Camp:











The results indicated that most youth reported they were “somewhat” or “a lot” better in many of these skills and attributes after participating in the Reading Camp. Growth in these character-relevant skills and attributes have both short- and long-term consequences for children as these skills have been linked to academic, social, and career success.

### **Conclusion**

The *Opportunity to Succeed Program* provides a rare experience for children in which supports for character development are thoughtfully and intentionally integrated into literacy-based activities. Therefore, for children with academic, social, and emotional difficulties (i.e., those who are most at risk for school failure), the *Opportunity to Succeed Program* provides a potential framework for promoting growth in these domains through one holistic curriculum.

Whereas ‘academic’ skills are important for success in life, oftentimes, achievement and success in youth from less-resourced backgrounds is related to these ‘soft’ skills such as perseverance, positive self-concept, work ethic, teamwork, and kindness.

### **Moving Forward**

Based upon the findings of its 2015 and 2016 programs, Inspiring the American Dream Foundation will continue research and development of its *American Dream Reading Camps*, while at the same time, begin scaling its *Opportunity to Succeed Program* through the introduction of an *American Dream Literacy Tool Kit*. Release of the tool kit is tentatively scheduled for the Spring of 2017.