While the entire world was challenged this past year — challenged to do differently, think differently -- Friends of the Children-Boston took on these challenges and went well above and beyond to serve the children -- and their families -- who are part of the “Friends” community. The Friends of the Children-Boston model was originally created to address adverse childhood trauma and instill resiliency by engaging in every part of its student participant lives—from the home, to the school, to the community. This unique organization provides a salaried, professional mentor, called a Friend, for a child’s entire childhood, from kindergarten through graduation for 12+ years, no matter what. The process starts every spring when the organization begins a four-week observation in kindergarten classrooms to identify those children who face an at-risk situation at home. Once selected, each student is matched with a long-term, full-time Friend who is a staff member of the Friends of the Children-Boston, and is trained in social work, education and youth development. To assure success, student ACHIEVERS receive years of comprehensive support. Each Achiever has a RoadMap for Success that lays out short-term and long-term goals and the incremental steps it will take to reach them. The RoadMap is focused on School Success, Social & Emotional Development, Improved Health, Making Good Choices, and Plans & Skills for the Future. But during a pandemic, that kind of commitment -- and more -- is needed more than ever before, when so many local and community programs were forced to go on hold or otherwise lost impact, while children and families struggled isolated. COVID-19 changed the lives of Achievers, creating new obstacles to their educational, social-emotional, and health needs. As these challenges took on a different meaning, educational inequity also was highlighted by the pandemic. Friends-Boston professional mentors continued to show up for all Achievers as it has done each day over the last 16 years. When the world was awakened and took to the streets to demand justice for the Black community, Friends-Boston remained steadfast in demanding equity in systems that impact youth, so Achievers could show up each day in their own power. As the world watched the economy collapse on the most vulnerable citizens, Friends of the Children-Boston stepped up to deliver weekly essentials so no one would be left behind. Not letting the pandemic deter its work to be there no matter what, Friends-Boston doubled down on its support of the Achievers and their families. “Our partnership with National Grid Foundation helps our Achievers envision their goals and a future, then draw clear lines between their academic success and their goals of career and college, even during a pandemic. But the most recent additional COVID relief support added a new dimension that helps with food insecurity for the entire family, along with successful remote learning.”

Yi-Chin Chen, Executive Director, Friends of the Children-Boston.
COVID-19 would put on basic needs and educational supports at the organization during the pandemic. Through two special grants earmarked for COVID relief during the spring and winter of 2020, The Foundation stepped up to help assure Achievers’ lives continued to have stability. “Our partnership with National Grid Foundation helps our Achievers envision their goals and a future, then draw clear lines between their academic success and their goals of career and college, even during a pandemic,” said Yi-Chin Chen, Executive Director, Friends of the Children-Boston. “But the most recent additional COVID relief support added a new dimension that helps with food insecurity for the entire family, along with successful remote learning.” With many additional donors and community supports in place, Friends-Boston continued to serve more than 140 of Boston’s most vulnerable children and youth ages 5-21, primarily living in Roxbury and Dorchester.

It worked with Boston Public Schools around remote education, including helping Achievers use Chromebooks, assisted families access steady internet, fostered partnerships with both caregivers and teachers, and helped children create learning environments at home. It provided noise-canceling headphones, desks and chairs, and even worked on educational backdrops so that Achievers were able to create their own space to focus on learning.

Excelling at mentoring excellence during a pandemic seems at first glance to be quite the oxymoron, but Friends-Boston’s success is demonstrable:

■ 91% of Achievers report consistent remote school attendance, compared to 72% for all Boston Public School (BPS) students despite Achievers’ having significant more barriers in their lives.

■ 69% of Achievers had successful course completion, compared to 24% of all BPS students (as demonstrated by 80% or more days of using their online learning platform).

■ In 2020, new data tools identified exactly what obstacles Achievers were facing in nearly real time (food insecurity, barriers to distanced learning, loss of income) and Friends-Boston pivoted its efforts to address these, while continuing 1:1 and group programming:

▲ 80% of the families are receiving deliveries of food from Friends-Boston since the start of the pandemic; receiving 35,000 lbs. of food to date

▲ 98% of Achievers graduated to the next grade, while all avoided incarceration and early parenting

▲ 7,320 items of PPE gear, including masks (adult and child sized), gloves, disinfectant, transportable first aid kits for vehicles, temporal thermometers, and hand sanitizer (as of December, 2020) have been provided

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Friends of the Children-Boston families identified food security as one of their most pressing and significant challenges. Friends-Boston responded and partnered with a number of organizations, and experimented with different ways of getting food to Achievers and their families. From staff picking up food donations from as far away as Foxboro, then sorting and delivering groceries to them, to local bodegas providing credits for groceries so that families can access the fresh vegetables and meat that its data shows they most want and need, Friends remains a true friend, indeed, by solving for key human needs.

Anti-Racism, Social Justice Friends
As if a pandemic was not enough to confuse, frustrate and provide detrimental impact on Achievers, 2020 bore witness to extraordinary social injustice and racism across the county with the murders of so many innocent people of color. With most Achievers identifying as black, brown or of ethnic descent, Friends of the Children-Boston immediately understood its key role in mentoring, supporting and teaching Achievers their worth and brilliance, even during the most trying of times.

As calls for justice echoed throughout the world, Friends-Boston continued its role and continued to raise its voice in demanding equity in systems that impact youth (as they always have) so that it Achievers can show up each day empowered, enlightened and enriched.
A trusted community leader and advocate, Friends-Boston also reached out to its stakeholders with a letter of support and solidarity that renounced systemic racism, and called for healing and unity, and recognition that our fate and success is inextricably linked to one another.

Further, to help illustrate and build upon messages of strength, social justice and anti-racism, Friends-Boston established a series of virtual monthly “coffee chats” to open a dialogue and seek solutions:

- Celebrated 20 Achievers’ graduations
- Carried out 9,500 in-person and virtual outings
- Offered close to 20,000 hours of support to its youth and their families
- All Achievers made progress in gaining proficiency in its 9 Core Assets
- 100% of youth continued to progress in their education trajectory
- With their Friends by their sides, Achievers experienced joy, felt comforted, learned new skills, built new habits, set bigger and bolder goals for their future, and continued to stay hopeful for a better tomorrow.

In January 2021, it offered a discussion with Imari Paris Jeffries, executive director, Kings Boston where participants discussed redefining the role of mentoring in racial healing and the role of that work in 2021; along with the important role Friends-Boston plays in Dr. Martin Luther King’s Legacy in 2021.

February’s Coffee Chat celebrated black excellence as part of Black History Month where Achievers and participants explored Amanda Gorman’s poem, The Hill We Climb, and what racial equality means to them.

For most of us, 2020 was a year like no other. For Friends-Boston, it was a year much like the others – a year where it continued to show up for its children, their families and the community, No Matter What.

**FRIENDS 2020 - AT A GLANCE**

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