

Project Report

Next Chapter has made significant progress towards its goal by hosting many events while making many connections and resources.

- **December 4, 2023:** We created a Google Classroom to reach out to more of the student body at schools we may not have access to. People joined, and we were able to reach a community of over 300 people. Resources, like articles and videos, were added to educate our classmates and peers about censorship in the form of book bans and the impacts it is having—and will continue to have.
- **December 5, 2023** - We spoke with our school's media specialist, Ms. Patricia Radwanski, to gain knowledge about how our issue looked in our school.
- **December 6, 2023-** In order to gain an understanding of the knowledge and perspective students in our district had regarding censorship in the form of book bans, we shared a Google Form with teachers from various elementary, middle and high schools. We received over 300 responses.
- **December 11, 2023** - We reached out to Allan Johnson, Director of Technology, Training and Resources to gain a greater understanding of how our issue looked in our school district.
- **January 2024-** We created a list of stakeholders both within the school district and the larger community, such as the local libraries, reached out through emails, and established a framework of activities for our action plan.
- **February 12, 2024-** We spoke to Dr. Dauber, our school principal, about the issue and what we wanted for our project. He gave us feedback and connections to help improve our work.
- **February 20, 2024-** We met with our school's art teacher, Mrs. Christa Martalotti to discuss the formation of a district-wide poster contest.
- **February 20, 2024-** We hosted a discussion with special guest Ms. Ewa-Dreidzic Elliot, a librarian at The College of New Jersey and immediate past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians. Over Zoom, she provided us with a great deal of research pertaining to the current landscape of censorship and book bans in New Jersey, and sparked a great conversation with her about the reasons behind book bans and the current landscape in our state.
- **February 21, 2024-** We met with Marayah Greene, author of the book, *Good Things* via Google Meet and gained knowledge about how censorship impacted her writing and how her book has been challenged because of the theme of grief.
- **February 23, 2024-** We met with the principals and teachers at the two upper elementary schools in our district to talk about the issue of censorship in the

form of book bans. We brainstormed the framework for future visits and presentations.

- **February 27, 2024-** We hosted screenings of the Oscar-nominated short documentary *The ABC's of Book Banning* over a school day. People were able to learn about book bans in ways they never viewed it and were able to begin to discuss ways of helping.
- **February 27, 2024-** We launched our poster contest focused on bringing awareness to censorship in the form of book bans. We judged the entries based on the 3 most aesthetically pleasing posters and most creative.
- **February 29, 2024-** We launched a website for students and others in our community, containing information about several events and resources. We plan to use this to educate our community. Our website's link is www.nextchaptergms.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **April 16, 2024-** We will visit Village Elementary School, a school within our district to educate ECHO (Exploration, Creativity, Humanity, Opportunity) students about censorship in the form of book bans. We also talked about how freedom of speech correlates with this.
- **May 2024 -** We will be featured as the first guests on a new podcast being launched by The West Windsor Voice, our local newspaper.
- **May 11, 2024-** We will be hosting a table at the West Windsor Farmers' Market to share our work and build community engagement.
- **May 18, 2024-** We will be performing a street play and hosting a table at COLORS, a celebration of the world's diversity, in front of the Princeton Library.
- **May 20-25, 2024-** We will be hosting *Next Chapter Week* at our school. During the week, we will be hosting events in which the students of our school will be able to learn more about the issue and how to take action from community members and experts.
- **Summer 2024 -** We will be hosting two, one hour seminars for community members to learn about the issue and how to take action.

A. Relevance

Our goal as a team is to educate our community about the importance of books remaining available to read so that people can benefit from all their resources. In our research, most people need to be aware of the rise of book bans around us and fully appreciate the importance of the freedom of free speech. To help bring awareness and prevent book bans, we hosted many events to properly show the current landscape in

and around New Jersey and the country. Our team contacted the immediate past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, Ms. Dzeidzic-Elliot, and planned a Zoom meeting where students could sign up to attend. The meeting was interactive, and students could ask questions and discuss the reasons behind the book ban movement. This helped students learn about our goals and concerns and helped us achieve them. We also hosted special screenings of *The ABC's of Book Banning*, an Oscar-nominated short documentary. This screening was presented to all who wished to attend. This opportunity also allowed students to learn about various facts and significant concerns about the problems we see more dramatically and attractively. Each event we have hosted has continued to bring awareness to the issue of censorship in the form of book bans.

B. Organization

Throughout the school, we tried to organize our team effectively and suited each individual's strengths and weaknesses, along with their passion for the specific topic. For example, our team stayed in touch throughout the year with organized email branches and groups; this proved especially practical after school and over long weekends and breaks. We organized our actions and activities through our Google Classroom, where students could access several resources and our events to active students. This Google Classroom also allowed students to communicate with us and build our following. In order to gather information and data from schools around us, we sent out surveys and questions to our community and potentially interested students. These surveys asked students questions to curate creative answers and thoughts about things that our team presented them with. Finally, our team split into several groups with sure captains to maximize our strength and split up the work. For example, Kahil was the captain of the poster contest team and promotional video, while Ozas and Neel were the captains of the curriculum-building team.

C. Resources

Throughout the year, our team has tried to learn as much as we could about book bans nationally, in our state, and in our local community. We consulted several experts in the field, connected with community members and thoroughly researched articles and organizations.

We connected with the following:

- Mrs. Patricia Radwanski, Grover Middle School media specialist.
- Mr. Allan Johnson, District Director of Technology, Training & Media Resources

- Ms. Emily Creveling, District ELA Supervisor (6-12)
- Mrs. Lindsay Jablonski, District ELA Supervisor (K-5)
- Mrs. Susan Totaro, District Chief Equity Officer
- Mrs. Pema Nodong, District Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Coordinator
- Dr. Jon Dauber, our principal, approved the events we hosted.
- Mrs. Christa Martoloti, Grover Middle School art teacher, helped us evaluate potential concerns for our poster contest and how to avoid them.
- Mr. Justin Dolcimascolo-Garrett (our couch) helped us host all our events in his classroom and communicate with adults we could not reach.
- West Windsor & Plainsboro Public Libraries
- Ms. Ewa Dzeidzic-Elliott, the immediate past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, helped us understand the current landscape of censorship and book bans in and around New Jersey.
- Ms. Maryah Greene, author

Below are some websites and organizations we used to gather research.

- New Jersey Association of School Librarians - <https://njasl.org/>
- American Library Association - <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks>
- Unite Against Books - <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/>
- PEN America - <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- Teachers College Columbia University <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2023/september/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-book-bans-sweeping-the-us/>
- Carnegie Mellon University - Heinz College <https://www.heinz.cmu.edu/media/2023/October/book-bans-may-have-unintended-consequences-in-increasingly-polarized-united-states>

D. Community Impact

We believe that our team has achieved many things throughout the 2023-2024 school year, additionally we believe that these achievements have made a positive and widespread impact on our school community. Starting out we began by conducting research in our school for what students were exactly interested in, more specifically what questions they had. From this data we created several events and opportunities for students based on their interests. For example, we hosted a meeting with Ms. Ewa-Dziedzic where students could ask questions to her that our team wouldn't have fulfilling answers too. Accordingly, we saw that students who attended were positively

impacted. We measured this through their responses to our google form summary questions. Additionally we hosted a screening of the Oscar nominated film called the *ABC's of Book Banning*. From this screening we saw that students demonstrated extreme passion when watching the film, showing visible sentiment and emotion toward our passion. However, after these school events our team realized that in order to make a truly large *community* impact we would have to branch out to people outside of our school community. Accessing our stakeholders such as our coach and parents helped us branch out to our entire community by contacting organizations that offered opportunities for our team to spread our impact to wider audiences. In the upcoming months, we are scheduled to host a table at our local farmers market, perform a street play at a cultural event in Princeton and host seminars at the local libraries. There is no doubt that as we move into the larger community our impact will be felt far and wide.

E. Community Involvement

In order to spread awareness about the adverse effects of book banning and the importance of books remaining available, our team initially worked closely with several school staff and eventually branched out to the community as we gained more knowledge and connections. One of the first things we did to achieve this was to communicate with Dr. Dauber, our principal, to discuss our team's purpose and future goals. In our meeting, Dr. Dauber provided us with several resources and contacts to effectively spread our impact. From there, we communicated with various district leaders and the principals of the two upper elementary schools. These individuals helped us plan several ideas for traveling to their schools and building excitement for our movement. We plan to present at both schools.

While our initial events were focused on our school and district, our plan for the upcoming months is to branch outward into our WWP community. We have events planned at the local farmers market, will be performing a street play at a cultural event in front of the Princeton Library and we will be presenting at local libraries over the summer. In addition we will be featured as the first guests on a new podcast by the West Windsor Voice, our local newspaper. By participating in these events, we are actively increasing the amount of the community we are educating.

F. Effectiveness of Action Plan

All in all, a lot of our work was to help raise awareness about how the issue of censorship in the form of book bans is growing- every day. We urged students to share this information and make a difference. We encouraged them to say something, look at

banned books, and stand up for what they believe is right. Through our workshops, Google Classroom, Instagram and website, students got recommendations on what to read to educate themselves. Articles and activities provided them with ways to learn more- and prizes in contests further motivated them to learn and grow. Students discovered how excellent books can be and all the knowledge in books- banned or not. Students have expressed an interest in writing letters to the state legislature supporting the "Freedom to Read" Act and continue asking us how they can help spread awareness.

G. Adaptation of Plan-

Since the time of our project proposal, we have had to adapt our plan, mostly due to the restraint in time. Because our coach Mr. Dolcimascolo-Garrett was split between two schools from October through January, there were weeks where we were not able to meet. While we were not able to move from planning to action, we did utilize this time to do more research and decided to shift our main focus from book bans specifically to a wider focus of censorship, and we used book bans as a shell.

The biggest adaptation we made to our action plan was the timing and roll out of our events. Our hope was to get started with our actions in early January, but our events started in February when our coach was back at our school full-time. Some of the solutions we added to our Action Plan like quickly connecting with the libraries and other outside organizations were placed on hold. The amount of time to plan a field trip to the other schools was longer than we originally thought. While we would have loved to have gotten started earlier, our team had solutions that we achieved in ways different from what we originally imagined and had possibly created an even larger. For example one of our solutions was to launch a podcast series for students who had been following our events. Instead, we were invited to be featured in a podcast series created by the West Windsor Voice, our local news service. We quickly realized as a team that this opportunity was quite more impactful than a rather more minute podcast series limited to our school.

We initially only planned to connect with libraries in our local community because we thought that was the most logical place to talk about book bans. As we talked with authors, experts and other stakeholders in the community, we made connections that will allow us to be present at local community and cultural events.

H. Sustainability of Project Impact

Looking at our project's sustainability and lasting impact, our team has a plan for building a pipeline of interested students and created several ways for our movement to go on throughout the community. To begin with, our team has attracted a group of middle school students who consistently attend our meetings, share insightful thoughts and would like to join our team next year. Being mindful of engaging incoming middle school students, our team spoke with the principals of the two upper elementary schools with the hope of creating opportunities for students there to learn about us and become engaged. We plan to present to students in the ECHO program (their gifted and talented program) at both schools with the idea that these students will be incredibly invested in our work and open to joining when they come to our school. We understand that the impact and sustainability of our project comes when we take our message out to the community and build partnerships. We have developed a website that has been sent out to our community partners such as the town libraries, local newspapers and some businesses. We have laid the groundwork for us to be visible in the community this spring at farmers' market, local cultural events and are working with the libraries to host seminars over the summer. We hope that through our events and connections, the work we have started will continue far beyond our time in school.

J. Reflection/Assessment

In reflecting on our project plan, we find that, as a team, through our project, we have benefited the community in many ways. We have helped students realize the negative aspects that come from book banning. Now, students from across the school are aware of the problem our team first realized and have realized that they would like to participate on our team or in the Community Problem Solving program to take action on their passions. However, one of the significant concerns we had as a team was students' hesitance to participate in our events due to unexpected controversy that might come with it. However, we tackled this problem by spreading our knowledge through several adults and an approach that relied on facts. Many students also underestimated how extensive this problem was and initially called it trivial. We approached this problem by calling in experts in the field to make a more impactful point, as students would listen to an expert and be more attracted to the event. Our team also dealt with a concern about the amount of people we'd be reaching, as we wanted to make sure that we were having a significant impact, to overcome this we began to look into events and organizations that would help us spread awareness outside of our school environment. Overall our team was forced to overcome many

hardships throughout our work, but instead of giving up we tried hard to overcome those obstacles and then turn them into successes. So in conclusion our team strongly believes that we have already made a large difference and that the pinnacle of our success is yet to come, as our team will continue to make an impact for months and even years to come.