

Next Chapter - Project Proposal

Area of Concern

Around the world, people look at books as a form of comfort, almost like a caregiver for their thoughts. Books are designed to be like this, finding people's weaknesses, they're desire for relatability; that's what makes books so loved, so respected. When you take away the sincere and humanlike qualities of one's writing, which, on second glance, is one's own voice, one's own perspective, a book becomes void, meaningless, even. Picture books to young adult books to classic titles are falling to this very problem in the form of censorship and book bans. Books such *Huckleberry Finn*, *Gender Queer*, and *The Hate U Give*, all books known for their stories that raise awareness about communities that have been marginalized are being challenged and removed from library shelves across the country. These very same books are needed by children to understand the vast amount of cultures and communities in the world. As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop wrote, books act as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for readers. Yet in many places, these mirrors and windows are being shattered. Stories are being muted. Opinions are being muted. Our very voices are in danger of being muted.

Along with our passionate thoughts on the situation, we conducted research and found that in 2022, in the United States, almost 3,000 books had been challenged. Within New Jersey, we found this pattern to repeat itself. For example, according to the American Library Association (ALA), there were at least 10 attempts to restrict access to a total of 23 book titles in New Jersey schools and public libraries within the first 9 months of 2023, and 13 were challenged in the entirety of 2022. While 13 and 23 might seem like a small number of books, the impact is immeasurable. If this trend continues to grow, before we know it, countless books will be gone, stories erased and voices muted.

It's important to realize that many of the banned books profoundly affect children's lives for the better. *Gender Queer*, the #1 banned book in America, focuses on a main character who identifies in the LGBTQIA+ community; a book that encourages people that you do not have to be a perfect copy of everyone around you. This book has proven to inspire hope and recognition in many people's hearts, possibly saving many lives in the process. It is the number one banned book in the country. That is no coincidence.

To further our research and understand the impact of censorship in the form of book bans, our team surveyed over 300 students in our school district ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade. 62.1% of the respondents were unaware of the movement to censor and ban books. This means they do not understand that the books they might cherish, books that might save lives, have been and are in danger of being removed from schools and libraries.

According to *Epic*, a digital reading platform, "The average American child reads about 5 books a month", and yet 3 out of every 5 children we surveyed are completely unaware of this censorship. How can we prevent censorship and book bans in our community

when a majority we polled do not know there is a problem? This is where our team decided to find the next step in our plan. We picked a few students to teach a little bit more about what's happening and our goal. Almost every single student we chose responded with a fair, but equal solution. For example one student responded with the following. "I think [censorship] is not necessary. The books being banned often have important lessons in them."

A common thread that came out of our interviews is that most people thought censorship and book bans were happening in places like Florida and Texas. They were shocked to hear there was a challenge in our neighboring town of Hamilton, New Jersey that made national news *and* that some parents in our very own district had voiced concern over some books.

Our voices are our entire lives, how we communicate, how we progress, how we make an impact on the world around us. Without them, we as a community would fail to find any justice, any progress in our knowledge. However, what we found is that these voices can be heard through us, small communities that amplify their voices. This is our goal, our passion, to use the voices of the students, the public, the experts. Censorship in the form of book bans is a burden to our society, preventing thought and beautiful ideas from sprouting, so we felt compelled to act!

Challenges Identified

1. Censorship may prevent insights into controversial topics.
2. Censorship sometimes infringes upon the rights of free speech, limiting the amount of unique perspectives on certain situations and severely limiting the exchange and debate of different concepts.
3. Students from marginalized communities may be targeted by politicians and others who are pushing the book ban agenda. This may stigmatize students within these communities and lead to them being ostracized from other students. As a result, this may lead to added mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.
4. Censorship may fuel curiosity and increase demand for the banned material. This may lead to underground circulation, making it more challenging to monitor and address potential concerns which are kept under wraps more intensely.
5. Authors may self-censor their work to avoid potential bans, limiting creativity and expression. Fear of backlash may also result in watered down less expressive writing.

6. Censorship is very subjective, it almost always depends on the person and people who are in power of banning them, this may create multiple standards for bans, creating increased confusion.
7. If institutions responsible for education and cultural discourse begin to support censorship, trust in these institutions may decline as people might question their motive and credibility behind these decisions.

Underlying Problem

Because censorship in the form of book bans has been on the rise over the past few years both nationally and in New Jersey, how might we, the community problem solvers of 2024, educate our community about the importance of books remaining available to read, so that people can benefit from their resources?

Solution Ideas

1. Develop a school & community poster campaign/contest to highlight the importance of diverse literature and consequences of censorship.
2. Educate elementary students about censorship and develop a letter writing campaign to influence local leaders
3. Feature interviews with students, teachers, and community members discussing the importance of intellectual freedom on our school video news program.
4. Connect with Parent Teacher Student Associations and town councils where community members can openly discuss their views on censorship.
5. Establish partnerships with organizations dedicated to free speech and Invite representatives to speak at school events.
6. Organize talks featuring authors, educators, and free speech advocates who can share their experiences with censorship.
7. Launch a social media campaign encouraging students to share their favorite banned books or passages.
8. Host a school-wide fair celebrating literature and intellectual freedom.
9. Create educational games or quizzes that test students' knowledge of banned books, censorship history, and related topics.
10. Launch a podcast series where students interview local authors, educators, and community leaders about censorship.
11. Collaborate with local libraries to organize events, displays, and book readings that highlight censorship.
12. Work with local media outlets to cover the awareness campaign, events, and initiatives.

Determination of Action Plan

To determine our action plan we used a set of criteria through an evaluation matrix (shown below) where we scored our solutions on a 1-10 basis. The first criteria we used is whether the solution will best accomplish the KVP in our Underlying Problem. For example, our team might choose to do something that will affect the entire school as opposed to doing something that will only affect a few classes. Our next criteria focused on accessing which solution would have the biggest impact on the Area of Concern. If the solution didn't support it, it was out. Next, we focused on whether the solution would fit in our budget. Some solutions were extremely expensive and not reachable by our financial status. And the last two criteria we chose were whether our stakeholders would be supportive, and whether our team had the time to commit to this effort for it to be completed within our project timeline.

	KVP	Impact on AoC	Budget	Stakeholders	Time	Total
Poster Contest	9	9	4	9	9	40
Elementary Schools	7	7	5	10	4	33
FPP Video Interviews	2	3	10	5	10	30
PTA Connection	1	1	9	7	6	24
Author & Educator Talks	8	10	6	8	7	39
Social Media Campaign	6	8	3	4	8	29
SchoolWide Fair	5	2	1	3	1	10
Launch a Podcast	4	4	2	2	3	15
Collaborate with Local Libraries	10	6	7	6	8	37
Work with Local Media Outlets	3	5	8	1	2	19

Action Plan

In order to educate our community about the importance of books remaining available to read, so that intellectual freedom remains, we devised the following steps in our action plan.

Our initial plan of action will be to create a poster campaign contest that will include basic information about censorship in the form of book bans, along with ways to communicate with our team specifically. Using Canva and connecting with our school's graphic design teacher, we plan to cover the entire school including the inside of literacy classrooms. In addition to our school, we plan to blanket areas throughout our local community such as parks, libraries, and other areas. Our timeline for this project is preferably by the end of February.

At the same time as our poster campaign, we will organize meetings with our elementary schools to educate students about censorship. Our hope is to create interactive activities such as creating lists of books students think are unfairly banned and writing letters of concern to local and state leaders. To achieve this goal we will communicate with the respective administrators of each school, set up a schedule and communicate with interested teachers. Our hope is that teachers will continue to discuss this topic with their students after our meeting.

Shortly after our poster campaign is up and running, we will plan to launch our video campaign using our school's main video news system, FPP. Our hope is to include interviews, opinions, and interactive elements that will make the topic one of interest to students in our school community. To achieve this goal we will first connect with Mr. Coppola, head of FPP for permission to add ourselves to the broadcast. If this video campaign is successful, we hope to share them with other schools in the district and branch out to social media platforms. We hope to have made an FPP video by the end of February and after that, have branched into social media by April or May.

Afterwards, we will organize workshops with authors and publishers to expand our range of impact. These workshops will likely take place at either our school, local library, these meets will also usually include the author helping people with their writing to attract attention, speeches on book bans themselves, and other things. To achieve this goal we will first ask for permission from the library owners and administrators from our school, then we will find local authors willing to cooperate with our plan before finally presenting at several places

Finally, we plan to collaborate with local libraries to raise awareness about this issue. Our hope is to be able to run short programs at the libraries in West Windsor and Plainsboro, the two towns that make up our regional school district in order to educate

the community, especially those who are passionate and interested. This way, they can make an impact in their own way. We will first talk to library administrators in order to see if they are interested. We will plan programs, add them to schedules, and promote our program with fliers at the libraries. We will then run the sessions for all those who want to attend. Our hope is to present these programs at the end of the school year into the summer.

Our team felt these solutions were realistic and impactful steps to implement during our first year of this project.