

Fort River Elementary - Civic Literacy and Organizing Unit

Diverse Democracy Grant Report

The Civic Literacy Unit was an existing project in 6th grade where students wrote letters about issues they cared about to decision-makers at various levels of government (school, town, state and federal). Later, they formed small groups based on the issues they were interested in and developed a proposal that would help solve a societal problem. The groups then pitched their proposals in a miniature lobbying meeting with a decision-maker (in years past, these guests have included: our principal, town government officials, state representatives and a member of Congress). Through the Diverse Democracy grant, we expanded his unit so that the scope of student work went beyond writing and advocacy and extended into a third phase when students organized for change on various issues. They learned about how to develop a strategy and choose tactics, make a plan and carry it out together. The project involved the entire grade level (four classes). It gave students a chance to extend their work in the classroom out into the broader community in a way that taught them important citizenship skills, and also allowed them to have an impact on the world.

The \$5,000 in grant funding was spent in the following ways:

- Contracted work with Organizers in Residence - Lindsey Peterson and Stephanie Jo Kent - for \$3,950.
- 20 copies of It's Our World, Too! By Phillip Hoose - \$250
- Student Budgets - \$453 total - various printed campaign materials, "Change the State Flag" t-shirts, postcards to lawmakers, large foam-board poster of newspaper article.
- Additional contracted work with Organizers in Residence - \$347 (the entire amount allotted for student campaign budgets was unnecessary, so we opted for additional paid time for our Organizers in Residence, which allowed for a more robust debrief of the campaigns).

The teaching team is thrilled with the results of the project. After beginning with student writing, as we always had, we used the values expressed by the students, along with the issue they were most interested in, to identify a series of campaigns students could potentially connect to. Students worked in small groups and recorded short video pitches aimed at convincing their classmates to choose their preferred campaign. After a deliberative process, students in each class decided to narrow their focus to one campaign apiece. One class chose to work on a campaign to pass a bill that would create a new state flag and seal for Massachusetts (the current flag is seen by many as racist, containing imagery that is violent and denigrating towards Native Americans). A second class chose to work on a campaign around the Green New Deal and local initiatives aimed at combating climate change. The final two classes both chose to work on a campaign around deforestation, focusing both on state-level legislation and the U.N.'s Trillion Tree initiative. From this point, each class began to develop strategies and tactics around their campaign with the support of our Organizers in Residence and a website they

developed containing resources for each of the campaigns. This site was also used for communication between the Organizers in Residence and the students, as well as between the students themselves.

Later, I'll describe the work the students did on the individual campaigns, but throughout the spring, there were three events that the different classes/campaigns participated in together:

- **Meetings with Local and State-level Elected Officials** - Early in April, as they were developing their campaign plans, students had a chance to meet with State Senator Jo Comerford, State Representative Mindy Domb, as well as four members of the Amherst Town Council (Alisa Brewer, Lynn Griesemer, Andrew Steinberg, and Mandi Jo Hanneke). These meetings were crucial to students' thinking around the campaigns they had chosen because they were able to get expert advice on what strategies and tactics might be most effective. In addition, they gained crucial allies, most of whom would continue to support them throughout the campaign!
- **Youth Activism Panel Discussion** - Later in April, students from all three campaigns worked together to organize a panel discussion where they could ask questions related to their campaigns, and youth activism in general. The panelists included Congressman Jim McGovern, local radio host and activist Monte Belmonte, plus teen activists from the local School Strike for Climate and Sunrise Movements (Saraphina Foreman, Lila Lofving and Adia Bennett), and Zaire Richardson from the "Turn it Around" campaign of The Charlestown Coalition. Students took the lead in organizing this event by greeting and escorting panelists, decorating for the event, calling members of the press, acting as moderators for the panel, choosing the pre-selected questions, and acting as media liaisons. The event received coverage in print media, as well as radio and TV (see accompanying document on media coverage).
- **Youth Activism Festival** - At the end of May, students from all three campaigns worked together to create a Youth Activism Festival to promote the work they had done on their campaigns, educate the public about the issues, and have people take political actions that furthered the goals of the campaigns. I will describe the specific campaign work that was done in a subsequent paragraph, but some of the highlights of the event in general included:
 - Nearly 200 students from two different schools attended, plus countless parents/guardians and community members.
 - State Representatives Lindsey Sabadosa and Mindy Domb attended and met with students, as did several members of the Amherst Town Council.
 - 6 groups that students had partnered with attended the event.
 - The event was covered on both radio and TV (see accompanying document on media coverage).

The following sections describe the work done by students in each of the campaigns:

Change the State Flag - This group worked to build support for a bill in the Massachusetts legislature that would begin the process of creating a new state flag and seal. Many see the

state's current flag and seal as containing imagery that is violent and denigrating toward Native Americans. The class worked in small groups on different tactics that they thought would advance the goal of passing the bill:

- *Coalition Building* - Students wrote two letters they used to reach out to Native American groups in Massachusetts, and groups they thought would be interested in supporting the campaign. While they didn't receive any response from Native American groups, they were able to make contact with several organizations who provided support in different capacities, including spreading the students' message on social media. This group also invited an expert to meet with the class: David Detmold is the coordinator of the website changethemassflag.com who visited the class to discuss the campaign, give advice, and continued to provide support throughout the spring.
- *Recruitment* - Students wrote a letter they used to reach out to students and teachers in other schools in hopes of recruiting others to become involved in the campaign. While they received a few responses to this letter, only one other school joined in the campaign. Pelham Elementary School is not far from us, and the 6th grade students there decided to join the campaign. They helped by getting postcards signed (see next section) and also provided important support at the Pelham Town Meeting to pass a resolution in favor of changing the state flag (this is part of a broad strategy of the campaign - a few dozen towns around the state have now passed similar resolutions).
- *Building Grassroots Support* - After asking David Detmold about what approach they should take, given that both their State Senator and Representative were already co-sponsors of the bill, students decided to create postcards addressed to State Senate President Karen Spilka and House Speaker Robert DeLeo, both of whom will ultimately play an important role in the bill being voted on. In total, 249 postcards were sent to the House Speaker and Senate President. Most of these postcards were gathered at the Youth Activism Festival. In addition, students recorded a video testimonial about changing the state flag, that was posted on the school's Instagram and Twitter accounts. While there is no way to completely track the results of this work, the video has been viewed 84 times, and resulted in additional videos being made. By tagging legislators with the videos on social media, they hoped to show support to the co-sponsors of the bill, and pressure those who weren't yet supportive.
- *Gaining Media Coverage* - students wrote letters to the editor, and made follow up calls to editorial staff. This resulted in the publication of two letters in the Daily Hampshire Gazette and The Boston Globe.
- *Visibility* - Students worked to make the issue of changing the state flag more visible to the public. The class' work inspired a paraprofessional at Fort River - Aaron Jensen - to create his own design for a new flag. The class was excited about Aaron's design and ended up having "Change the State Flag!" t-shirts made with it, along with what they called "Lil Flags" (small versions of Aaron's design on popsicle sticks) that were given away at the Youth Activism Festival. In addition, they created a "Wheel of Knowledge" game that people could play at the festival. This allowed more people to learn about the problems inherent in our current flag.

Preventing Deforestation/Trillion Trees - This group worked with a two pronged approach. They wanted to build support for legislation in Massachusetts that would protect the forests that are so important in the state, while also making sure to plan additional trees. They used the following tactics to accomplish these goals:

- *Seedling give-away* - Students contacted local businesses to solicit donations of tree-seedlings. Three different businesses, plus the Amherst Tree Warden, agreed to donate seedlings (160 trees in total), and three full-size trees. Students created a sign-up form that was distributed at Fort River, plus two other local schools. As the forms came in from people interested in receiving a seedling, students created a tracking system to ensure that they could get the correct tree species to recipients. The seedlings were distributed at the Youth Activism Festival. An additional part of the festival that students organized was a basketball game - Fort River against their rival Crocker Farm - where the winning team would receive a ten-foot apple tree to plant on their school's grounds. Fort River emerged victorious and students were happy to plant the apple tree in the school's garden.
- *Recruitment* - Students wrote a letter aimed at recruiting students from other schools to join the campaign. While they focused their efforts on Eastern Massachusetts, where forests are less prevalent, the school that ended up joining them was Jackson Street School in Northampton. They contributed to some of the work that our students were doing (see next bullet point), but 5th grade students at Jackson Street School, who, according to their teacher "were emboldened" by Fort River students, went on to lobby their own food services director on the issue of foods containing palm oil, which was an issue of concern for them.
- *Thanking Champions of Forests* - many of our local representatives are supportive of legislation protecting forests. Students decided to make an oversized tree-shaped thank you card for those legislators. They had students at Fort River and Jackson Street School sign individual leaves thanking legislators. The 178 leaves were then fastened to the tree, which was personally delivered to the State House by three students. The students met with State Representatives Provost and Dubois, who are both sponsors of legislation protecting forests in Massachusetts. The tree-shaped card was accompanied by a letter thanking each of the co-sponsors of the bills.
- *Responding to pressure from opposition* - Having learned from their coalition partner, The Wendell Forest Alliance, that there was a group of legislators who were receiving pressure from timber industry lobbyists to vote against forest-protection bills, students decided to make sure those legislators heard other voices on the issue. They created materials, recruited their peers, and organized a phonebank. Due to this work, at least 43 individual calls in favor of protecting Massachusetts' forests were placed to legislators offices. Students also had people write cards to these legislators during the Youth Activism Festival.
- *Gaining Media Coverage* - Students contacted the editor of the Amherst Bulletin with an opinion-editorial piece they had written about protecting forests. This piece appeared in the paper in early June (see accompanying document on media coverage).

- *Lobbying local officials* - Students wrote to and lobbied the Amherst Zoning Board and the Shade Tree Committee to ask that all new construction in town should aim to preserve 30% of the canopy and that trees that are cut down are replaced.

Green New Deal - Students in this group worked to draw attention to the Green New Deal resolution on the federal level, but also spent time advocating for a series of local initiatives that would help combat climate change.

- *Student Strike for Climate* - Students led 40 of their peers in an event on the common across the street from Fort River in conjunction with the national Student Strike for Climate on May 3rd.
- *Fort River Bike Exchange* - As part of the Youth Activism Festival, people were able to donate an unwanted bicycle that was then given away.
- *Gaining Media Coverage* - Students contacted the editor of the Daily Hampshire Gazette with an opinion-editorial piece they had written about the Green New Deal. This piece appeared in the paper in mid-May (see accompanying document on media coverage).
- *Research* - Students conducted research into alternative energy and conservation.
- *Building Grassroots Support for Local Climate Initiatives* - several groups of students petitioned various parts of the town government at the Youth Activism Festival. They also met with the Town Manager to discuss their proposals:
 - Building solar panels at Amherst Regional High School
 - Holding a “Car Free Day” in Amherst every Sunday
 - Transportation Bond Proposal written to local officials and State Rep. Mindy Domb asking that wider roads, bike lanes, and bike-sharing stations to be required on every transportation bond issued by the state.

Social Media - Much of the work done by students on these projects was documented on Fort River’s Instagram account: @fortriverschool . We attempted to tag @teaching_tolerance with each post, but we weren’t 100% consistent. Social media was also used by students as a campaign tactic in many cases.

Looking Ahead - When we did our final reflection on the project with the students, they were asked if they wanted to continue their work into the summer. About 40% of students signed up to form a small group within their campaign and as I write this, many are already in touch with each other, and some have even connected with coalition partners or state legislators. Fortunately, students work on the project spawned interest from teachers at three additional schools in our district in building on the work of the Civic Literacy and Organizing Unit, so we hope to expand the work next year. Ideally, we are able to secure funding to continue working with our Organizers in Residence, and are able to train more teachers to do this type of teaching.

From the entire team here at Fort River, thank you SO much Teaching Tolerance! This project was a grand experiment, and having your support to help make it happen with such a large group of students, was crucial.