



# **ABJ Civic Arts Center ABJ Project LIFT ↑ Freedom School Report**

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ABJ Civic Arts Center

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OUR VISION

ABJ is at the Center of Art that produces Peace, Unity, and Hope.

## OUR MISSION

The mission of Annie B. Jones Civic Arts Center (ABJ) is to help youth and young adults to become change agents in their own community by offering a range of impactful, arts-based leadership development and empowerment activities.

## OVERVIEW

On March 24, 2022, in an Illinois State Board of Education press release, Illinois proudly announced, "The Phillip Jackson Freedom School Grant," "created by Public Act 101-654", "a \$17 million dollar grant for the nation's first state-funded Freedom Schools network". In the Fall of 1963, the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) field secretary, Charlie Cobb proposed that Freedom Schools be set up: "To fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions ... to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teachers a real question ... to create an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives – ultimately new directions for action".

**(Source: <https://www.crmvet.org/info/fs.htm>, *Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964, By Bruce Hartford, 2014.*)**

Historically, rising out of Freedom Summer of 1964, in Mississippi, which ravaged the mental, social, financial and educational hopes of many African Americans, Freedom Schools were created as a response to our countries need to offer equitable solutions for education and empowerment for African American youth. African Americans realized the need for something different to combat the educational systems of slavery and sharecropping. Today, in 2023, this need is still prevalent. ABJ Freedom School is a response to this need. Through the use of the Amistad curriculum, Ron Barker's Literacy assessments and authored text, "The Zoopremes", authentic experiences focused on the Civil Rights Movement, Film, Music, Theater, podcast instruction, exposure to, and workshops with celebrity and industry experts, and community structured civic circle arts activities, our youth experience success through project based learning, critical thinking, activation of creative expression, social, emotional and character development. The ABJ Project LIFT Freedom School supports and develops African American youth to discover who they are and what they are, by reflecting their value through the beautiful complexities, strength and power of the African American experience.

## PROPOSED SOLUTION

Today, ABJ Civic Arts Center acts to develop community change agents through the youth we serve. We develop youth who return to positively influence and impact their communities in a myriad of ways. In light of the national cry for acknowledgement and inclusion of African-American History curriculum in schools across the country, we want to increase our population and serve up to 200 youth per year. Our future response to this necessity is to consider creating a microschool and eventually transforming into a national Freedom School model in the coming years.

## NEXT STEPS

ABJ's Freedom School is constantly evolving. Our first ever cohort was successful in that African American youth were engaged in Civic Engagement, Literacy, Film, African Drumming, Podcasting, Music Production and Songwriting. Our next cohort, (Summer and Fall 2023), will participate in a civil rights themed staged reading focused on the youth involvement in The Movement and the re-enactment of several historical moments, including; the March on the Edmund Pettis Bridge and the March on Washington, D.C. August 28, 2023, will mark the 60th year Anniversary of that pivotal moment in American History. Theses re-enactments, are from the original play "Pieces of a Shattered Dream" written by ABJ President/CEO, Pastor Victoria C. Brady, who wrote the script after participating in a week-long "I Have a Dream" tour with 200 Chicago youth in 2009. In Spring 2024, our goal is to take our Freedom School youth to Georgia, to experience the "I Have a Dream" tour, and to offer a full production of the play, " Pieces of a Shattered Dream."

## FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS

Through a grant from the State of Illinois, our current programming budget is \$350,000, covering up through Spring 2024. We continually seek funding to continue offering Freedom School to community youth citywide beyond the Spring of 2024, through additional grants, donations and fundraisers.





# OUR FREEDOM SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS



**PASTOR VICTORIA C. BRADY**  
PRESIDENT/CEO

**MS. DEBORAH ROSS**  
DIRECTOR OF ARTS  
AND EDUCATION



**MR. RONALD BARKER**  
AUTHOR, "THE ZOOPREMES",  
LITERACY SPECIALIST

**MR. KEVIN TYLER**  
MUSICAL  
PRODUCTION  
TEACHING ARTIST



**DR. GALE FRAZIER**  
PARENT AND COMMUNITY  
OUTREACH CONSULTANT

**MS. VIKKI O. STOKES**  
SENIOR PROGRAMS AND  
OPERATIONS CONSULTANT



**MR. PRIESTLEY WILLIAMS**  
FILM AND PODCAST  
TEACHING ARTIST

**MS. NATASHA JAMES**  
LITERACY TEACHER



**MS. TUYENI AKANKE**  
LITERACY TEACHER

**MS. AFRIKA PORTER**  
BLACK HISTORY  
TEACHING ARTIST



**MINISTER RAHIM ATON**  
ABJ WATCH PATROL  
SUPERVISOR

**MS. CHINEZE MOGBO**  
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
TEACHING ARTIST







# OUR FREEDOM SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Subject	Description
Literacy	<i>Utilizing the Amistad curriculum, students explore the contributions of Africans and African-Americans throughout history. We also use African American authors, such as Ron Barker, "The Zoopremes" and Master degreed specialists to inspire and nurture our students to experience dramatic growth in Reading.</i>
Music	<i>Our Music content is a vehicle for youth self expression and writing development. Students learn the Art of songwriting, how to produce and create audio beats, and compose songs focused on peace, activism, inspiration and motivation, with industry level teaching artists. Our students are given the opportunity to perform their original songs they create on professional stages in concerts and musical theatre performances.</i>
Film and Podcasting	<i>Our students work alongside industry level, teaching artists to capture their experiences, opinions and creative thoughts. Students are taught to transform themselves into personas they create, empowering their self-identity. Our podcasting allows extensive development of voice, confidence, intonation and reflection in the moment, developing their confidence and self-identity.</i>
African Centered Traditions	<i>At A.B.J, we believe in honoring, appreciating and applying the practices of our ancestors in everything we do. We begin our sessions with circle centered activities, incorporating drumming, cooperative games and call and response songs. This allows our youth to express themselves and problem solve, so that they understand how to spread the essence of peace in their communities. Parent and Community Engagement is also integral to Freedom School. Our parents also participate in workshops alongside their children, strengthening our universal bond.</i>
Civic Engagement	<i>Through our Civic Engagement project based, real world activities, our students have re-enacted the March on Washington, 1963, analyzed and reimagined the poem, "My People," by Langston Hughes, as they learned about their value and purpose, as it relates to the American Dream. Our students also participate in original plays by President/CEO, Pastor Victoria Brady, also re-enacting The Selma to Montgomery marches and incident on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Racial justice and equity are core elements of everything we teach our youth.</i>
Youth Safety and Community Engagement	<i>We are a village. Our students experience the ultimate safety of knowing that we have their back, mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically. We offer "Trybe Time," as a core element for youth connection, as part of our Civic Arts Circle framework. Our facilitators are experts in mental health and social emotional learning. In addition, we have our own A.B.J Watch Patrol who are present before, during and after our programming. Our patrol are present outside and inside the building where we serve students, to monitor and guide, problem solve and serve as mentors.</i>

# ABJ

## Our Outcomes

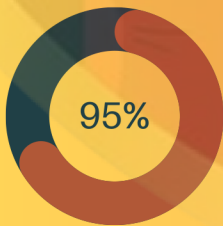
We have concluded that Freedom School was a complimentary measure to student dramatic Literacy growth, as indicated on the ready state assessments. On average, students who completed Freedom School grew by 2 grade levels, from beginning of the year to the end of the year. We recognize that our students also participated in school level interventions and supports in Literacy as well. Our observations of student participation, inquiry and confidence levels demonstrated growth as indicated through an increase in student engagement over time (focus, creativity, research ability). At the beginning of our six week program, only two of the eighteen students would regularly ask questions, build on ideas, and contribute and demonstrate understanding of new concepts. By the middle of our program, 95% of our students demonstrated engagement as indicated by the aforementioned factors.

All students experienced instruction from Industry teaching artists and specialists, and Master Degreed educators, and encountered their very first experiences in courses such as Civic Engagement and African American History (The Amistad curriculum). In addition, our students were able to engage with an African-American, male author, Literacy Specialist, Mr. Ron Barker, who not only developed and created the Literacy curriculum and text "The Zoopremes," utilized, but also served as an Instructor. All students participated and completed, Instructor created pre and post assessments in each content area, demonstrating understanding and mastery of new vocabulary and concepts by the end of our program.

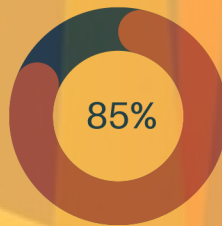
Our students were also surveyed, at the beginning of our program on the qualities and habits of being a struggling versus advanced reader, as part of Mr. Barker's curriculum. On average, students reported they demonstrated 60% of the qualities noted under struggling readers. Of the most common habits were spending most of their time on TikTok and only reading when they have a school assignment. As students were instructed from the text, Mr. Barker's, "The Zoopremes," we saw an increase in oral reading volunteers, by 95%.

We are excited by the opportunities that presented themselves during our program. The Principal supported every aspect of outreach and promotion and even taught Literacy classes. School leader buy in is essential for Freedom School success

An essential component of our program is for teachers from the actual school site to instruct. We know that connection and relationship development are essential for student success. School site personnel support is an undeniable element for a Freedom school program or micro school to succeed. We have determined that district level support could also be instrumental for optimal function and future expansion. ABJ Civic Arts Center envisions a future where we function as a microschool within several schools, and/or the development of our very own full school site.



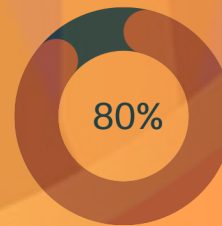
OF ALL STUDENTS REPORTED FREEDOM SCHOOL WAS FUN!



OF ALL STUDENTS REFERRED TO 100% OF ALL INSTRUCTORS HAVING A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEM.



OF ALL STUDENTS WHO REMAINED THE ENTIRE PROGRAM AND GREW IN LITERACY ON PROGRAM AND STATE ASSESSMENTS.



OF ALL STUDENTS REPORTED APPRECIATING HAVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN INSTRUCTORS, ASKING FOR MORE, AND WANTING THEM TO RETURN NEXT YEAR.

**"It takes a village to raise a child."  
Nigerian Proverb,  
ORAN A AZU NWA**

Our students expressed in self-report post assessments the following promising feedback:

- "Thank you for understanding us."

- "Lots of fun."

- "This class teaches more about our History."

- "Any topic can be a podcast."

- "Thank you for getting us out of our shell."

- "Thank you for the strings you pulled to make everything happen."





# OUR FUTURE



***ABJ FREEDOM SCHOOL IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE LEGACY OF OUR CULTURE'S PRESERVATION. IT IS THROUGH THE YOUTH THAT WE PLANT THE SEEDS TO INVIGORATE AND REVIVE PEACE AND RESTORATION WITHIN BLACK COMMUNITIES.***





