

# Chalkbeat

NEW YORK

## A Bronx middle school is giving out books by authors of color. Next up: Zoom book clubs.

By [Ashleigh Garrison](#) Jul 17, 2020, 6:00pm EDT



*The Bronx Book Project is giving students free books by Black and brown authors.* Jodi Benjamin-Schneider

As educators across the country consider how to talk with students about the nation's ongoing racial reckoning, South Bronx Early College Academy is getting a head start. The charter school's Bronx Book Project is giving its students free books by Black and brown authors and will be hosting Zoom book clubs.

Middle school students who showed up for this week's giveaway went home with bags full of books. All told, the school has distributed some 500 books so far.

"People of color are markedly underrepresented in children's literature — we want our students to have access to stories that resonate, raise consciousness, and empower them," Jodi Benjamin-Schneider, who is a member of the school's board and spearheaded the initiative, said in a statement.

The effort coincides with massive antiracism demonstrations across the country following the May 25 police killing of George Floyd. In New York City, many students and teachers protested police violence, demanding fewer cops and more counselors in schools. And more than a thousand people, including teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals, penned a letter demanding changes, such as new anti-racist curriculum.

The books on offer at South Bronx Early College included the nonfiction book “Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You” by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, and “New Kid,” Jerry Craft’s graphic novel about a student of color who struggles to fit into his new, majority-white private school.

Benjamin-Schneider said she got the idea for the project a couple of months ago while working at a food distribution program, where books were also being handed out. She realized that there weren’t enough titles that reflected Black and brown experiences. That’s when she decided to fundraise to bring diverse texts to South Bronx Early College.

Benjamin-Schneider partnered WHEDco, a housing and development nonprofit organization in the Bronx, to raise money. WHEDco is also receiving bilingual books and books by diverse authors for its Head Start program.

In two weeks, Benjamin-Schneider raised about \$10,000. She then purchased about 1,500 books after consulting with library specialists, an ELA teacher from the school, and several anti-racism reading lists. (About 400 of those books will be distributed through WHEDco.)

Benjamin-Schneider said the goal was to “get these books to kids for reading this summer,” since the students didn’t have library access during quarantine.

The planned Zoom discussion groups will be composed of groups of four to five students. Since many of the books deal with serious topics, it is important to go beyond just getting them to students, Benjamin-Schneider said.

Volunteers will moderate the discussion.

Rising eighth-grader Aiden Speller was one of the students who attended the book fair and plans to participate in the virtual book club. Aiden said he was glad to see some of his classmates at the fair.

“A lot of black authors are not being heard,” he said. “It’s good that we’re able to get books from people of color authors.”

Principal Brian Blough emphasized the importance of the initiative, especially given that students had been learning remotely for much of the past year. Distance learning proved that students respond best when they feel inspired by the conversation and content presented to them, he said.

“Having an event like this and getting so much of the material into the hands of kids right now makes it a true community conversation, which is really powerful,” Blough said.

Link: <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/7/17/21328956/bronx-middle-school-free-books-by-authors-of-colors-next-up-zoom-book-clubs-summer-school-nyc>