

Entering History: Learning, Teaching, and Making History in the 21st Century

Originally proposed for the Michael J. Perkins School, K-5, Boston – November, 2011

October, 2013

Please note:

The following proposal, written two years ago, was not funded and we were not able to implement it as written at the Michael J. Perkins School, Boston. However, we are deeply committed to the themes, the vision, and the possibilities it expresses. We are placing it on The National Classroom's website in the hope that somewhere, in our "national classroom," we will find partners and resources to put it into effect in the near future. If such a possibility interests or excites you, please contact us.

The National Classroom, Inc.
16 Beals Street
Brookline, MA 02446

Barney Brawer

barney.brawer@thenationalclassroom.com
(617) 905-3156

Katharine Scheid

katharine.scheid@thenationalclassroom.com
(857) 753-1690

Project Overview

In recent years, the teaching of U.S. History has, in many elementary schools, been reduced to episodic activities tied to specific holidays, rather than a sustained and organized intellectual inquiry. The new MA Framework / Common Core Standards for ELA and Literacy offer the opportunity to teach U.S. History as a vehicle for bringing all children to essential College and Career Ready levels of academic performance. Rather than implementing Common Core standards with a hodge-podge of informational texts teaching isolated skills, the Michael J. Perkins School, K-5, invites children and teachers to "enter history": learning, teaching, and making history together.

We propose to teach ALL of our students to read complex texts, ask important questions, seek additional content knowledge, and communicate their own answers to the great events, struggles, and dilemmas of our nation – past, present, and future. We believe that this intellectual work, this rigor, this opportunity should not wait until students are teenagers in high school.

We propose to begin anew the serious teaching of U.S. History in our elementary schools.

I. Organization Profile

The Michael J. Perkins School is a Boston public school, grades K-5, located inside the Old Colony housing development in South Boston. In the last three years, Old Colony – designated the "most physically distressed public housing site in Boston" – began a 10-

year plan to be rebuilt as the most “green” public housing in Massachusetts. Phase 1 of that plan, including more than 100 brand-new townhouse and mid-rise apartments for low-income families as well as the new Tierney Learning Center, has been completed. Groundbreaking for Phase 2 is scheduled on November 7.

Our student body is racially and ethnically diverse, drawn from the entire East Zone area, but remains almost entirely low-income students. 90.9% of our students qualify for free or reduced price breakfast and lunch; approximately 46% are Hispanic, 35% African-American, 8% White, 4% Asian, and 7% multi-racial.

At the Perkins, we see each child as a thinker, a reader, a writer, mathematician, artist, and scientist. We offer a rich, carefully-planned and diverse curriculum designed to bring out the best in every young person. We teach children to have high expectations for themselves and to conduct themselves in a manner that turns those expectations into reality.

We are constantly seeking the best ways to bring each student to the highest levels of performance. We never give up on a student. Our central goal is to insure that all of our graduates have the skills, knowledge, and self-confidence they need to enter middle school, high school, college and the workforce prepared for academic and personal success.

II. Problem Statement

The teaching of U.S. History has almost disappeared from America’s elementary schools. Children are exposed primarily to short lessons that accompany such holidays as Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King’s Birthday. We have, unfortunately, become used to encountering ten-year-olds who may have made turkey cut-outs in November and know that Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, but have no idea how our country was formed, what the Constitution says, what “slave states” and “free states” meant, why the Civil Rights movement was necessary, what the Great Depression was, or why we fought World War II.

The Roman philosopher Cicero wrote, “To not know what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child.” Today’s Common Core standards in English Language Arts offer an intensified focus on analytic thinking, on reading and writing to build *content knowledge*. Rather than implementing the Common Core by offering up a hodge-podge of informational texts to teach isolated ELA skills, we need to invite children (and teachers) to wrap their brains around big questions, to read, analyze, and respond to texts which offer critical knowledge and challenging questions about our nation’s history.

What leads individuals and groups to explore parts of the planet unknown to them? When two groups of people from different parts of the planet meet each other for the first time, what determines whether they kill each other or join together? How does a collection of scattered communities, with both shared and diverging interests, decide to become the United States of America?

Across this grand terrain, what are the choices people make, given the circumstances in which they find themselves? How did we, as a community and as a nation, come to be who we are?

These are the enduring questions and dilemmas of U.S. History. It is our job as educators to provide our children with access to the content knowledge and analytic skills they need to wrestle with these questions, to develop their own understandings of our nation's heritage, and to participate effectively as citizens in our democracy.

Horace Mann, visionary founder of Massachusetts' system of public education, wrote the following in 1840. Let us forgive him for the archaic use of "men" to mean all people: he was an unstinting advocate of equal education for women.

The theory of our government is – not that all men, however, unfit, shall be voters – but that every man, by the power of reason and the sense of duty, shall be [educated] to be a voter. Education must bring the practice as nearly as possible to the theory.

He asks:

What resources are there, in the whole domain of Nature, at all comparable to that vast influx of power which comes into the world with every incoming generation? ... Each one of these millions, with a fitting education, is capable of adding something to the sum of human happiness and of subtracting something from the sum of human misery.

We believe that, to meet today's Common Core standards, we must teach ALL of our students to read complex texts, ask important questions, seek additional content knowledge, and learn to communicate their own answers to the great dilemmas of our nation – past, present, and future. We believe that this intellectual work, this rigor, this *opportunity* should not wait until students are teenagers in high school. We propose to begin anew the serious teaching of U.S. History in our elementary schools.

We have already begun that process at the Michael J. Perkins School. We seek funding to proceed more systematically with this task. We believe that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for future generations depends on our doing it well. We invite our teachers and our students to "Enter History: Learning, Teaching, and Making History in the 21st Century."

III. Program Description

a. History and the Massachusetts Framework / Common Core Standards for ELA and Literacy

The Massachusetts Curriculum Framework / Common Core Standards (CCSS) will guide all of our curriculum design. Our students will, as the Framework requires, "build strong content knowledge, ... comprehend as well as critique, ... value evidence, ... and come to understand other perspectives and cultures." (page 9) These "capacities of the literate individual" frame the College and Career Ready guidelines of the Common Core. Our U.S. History curriculum will, as the guidelines state, "help students establish a base of knowledge by engaging with works of quality and substance." It will teach them to "become proficient through research and study." They will "read purposefully and listen

attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise.” They will “refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking.”

History, in its essence, requires students to be “engaged and open-minded – but discerning” when reading and listening. They must “work diligently to understand precisely what an author ... is saying,” but they must also “question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises in order to assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning.” Through this project, they will learn to “cite specific evidence, [make] their reasoning clear ..., and constructively evaluate other’s use of evidence.” These Common Core standards are at the heart of what history is.

The study of U.S. History will teach our students that “people from often widely divergent cultures, who represent diverse experiences and perspectives, must learn and work together.” The study of classic documents and historical narratives will permit them to “vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own.” The alignment between the Common Core guidelines and the tasks of history is near-perfect.

b. Entering History:

Teacher development, curriculum design, and home-grown leadership

“It is virtually impossible to create and sustain over time the conditions for productive learning for students when they do not exist for teachers.”

– Seymour B. Sarason, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (1993)

Our teachers, like our students – and very many of us – must truly “enter history.” We have not, ourselves, been well-educated in the complexities of historical knowledge and analysis. That is why our schools and teachers have so frequently shied away from the big topics and central questions of history, especially in recent years when there is no consensus about the “right answers.” In order to create the conditions for productive, analytic learning for students, we must create those conditions for ourselves. This proposal is built on our commitment to enter history, students and teachers together: acquiring new knowledge, asking new questions, framing and communicating our own answers, individually and collectively. That is what history is.

This project will create a Curriculum Development Team of six classroom teachers and one experienced BPS teacher who will serve as Project Developer. This group will meet repeatedly throughout the first two years of Entering History. In addition to assembling the curriculum for children, this Curriculum Development Team will be exploring our nation’s history at their own adult levels. Several years ago, the popular and productive Intel Math Initiative invited teachers to “do math” in order to teach math. Teachers in this project will be invited to “do history.” In the current school year, teachers at the Michael J. Perkins School in grades 3-5 have begun to assemble key materials and design lessons joining the study of U.S. History to the Common Core standards. Each two-month period of the school year is devoted to one of five Big Chunks leading to the creation of our country.

- Who was here before Columbus arrived? (the study of Native Americans)
- The European explorers
- The creation of the American colonies
- The American Revolution
- The creation and core principles of the Constitution of the United States

If we can assemble the resources to continue and expand this project, we hope to develop a two year curriculum for grades 4-5 which will bring our students' knowledge from the founding of our nation through the Civil War, industrialization, immigration, two World Wars, and into the 21st century. A daunting challenge, but an important one.

We are now conducting our trial run. We are experiencing the challenge and the excitement of doing history with our students. At the end of two months, one of the most significant findings has been the level of interest and motivation that the study of history has evoked in our students, notably including both our highest- and our lowest- performing students. Our teachers have been struck by examples of extraordinary desire, effort, and persistence in the reading of challenging texts, especially the commitment and diligence shown by several students whose previous work had rarely exhibited those qualities. One teacher described two of her most struggling readers working as a pair, non-stop for 90 minutes, to decode and understand several pages about Columbus' voyage to the West Indies. Another teacher noted how upset one volatile student became when he realized that his pull-out Speech services would mean missing his class' history lesson. When his teacher promised that she would make up the history lesson the following morning with him individually, he was immediately consoled and appreciative.

After our current un-funded pilot year, this grant would enable the Curriculum Development Team of teachers to create, with greater specificity:

- content maps and lesson plans based on the MA Curriculum Framework for History and Social Sciences
- developmentally appropriate essential questions
- alignment with the Common Core standards for Literacy in History / Social Studies.

They will select and align student materials of varying levels of text complexity that will:

- encourage our students to engage in content-rich conversations (Speaking and Listening Standard 2.1)
- identify the main idea supported by key details (Reading Informational Text Standard – RI 4.2)
- explain events, concepts, and ideas in a historical text including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text (RI 4.3)
- understand the meaning of domain-specific vocabulary – e.g. *militia*, *self-evident truths*, *the interests and rights of citizens*, *representation*, etc. (RI 4.4)
- describe the structure (chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of the events, ideas, concepts, or information presented in a text (RI 4.5)
- compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and information provided (RI 4.6).

The Curriculum Development Team will create lessons that include students' written responses to historical texts, teaching our pupils to:

- write informative or explanatory texts to examine a historical topic, conveying ideas and information clearly (Writing Standard – W 5.2)
- write analytic pieces on historical topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information (W 5.1)
- conduct short projects of historical research that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic (W 5.7)

- draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research (W 5.9)
- produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience (W 5.4)

In coordination with text-based lessons, our Curriculum Development Team will select meaningful field experiences from the MA Framework for History and Social Science's *Appendix E: Massachusetts Museums, Historic Sites, Archives, and Libraries* to support and expand classroom lessons. This outside-the-classroom learning will be a crucial piece of our curriculum design because so much of the history we will be studying unfolded in our own backyard. We also intend to incorporate service experiences as part of the field trips we design. Civic engagement will be one of the most important outcomes of this work, if we do our jobs right.

The Curriculum Development Team will continue to meet and work, with stipends for their time, after school every two weeks throughout the two academic years covered by this proposal.

By giving students access to content-rich information and experiences, it is our hope that both students and teachers will be able to see the big picture and use the skills that are needed to consider courses of events or choices which might have occurred, but didn't. The content and structure of historical narratives – what was emphasized and what was omitted, whose stories were told and whose overlooked, which events are perceived to be the result of decisive action and which “just happened” – will enable our students to understand the process of “making history.” With time for teachers' learning and discourse as well as a part-time teacher's position to orchestrate this work, we can build a framework which includes the moral purposes for studying history:

- What are the “lessons of history”? What we can or should we do in the future, based on what occurred for good or ill in the past?
- How do we develop individual and collective identity by learning who “we” are, in all the collective groups we are part of: our families, our neighborhoods, our races, ethnic groups, social classes and – most importantly – our nation.
- Who are “We, the People ...” and who do we want to be? What can we do to make that happen?

These are the grand purposes for which we all – adults and children – enter history. This is the way we make history for ourselves, our children, and posterity.

c. Evaluation

We seek to hire, with stipends, five BPS teachers from schools other than the Perkins, to evaluate our students' written essays, over time. This will provide external verification of our progress toward meeting the standards that relate most directly to this work. These outside evaluators will score (and comment upon) student essays in response to an analytic question in U.S. History, using a standards-aligned rubric chosen or developed by the Curriculum Development Team. A “gold medal” target for this project would be students (or adults !) who can respond cogently to the following question:

Since, at the time of the U.S. Constitution, Massachusetts was the only state that had abolished slavery as incompatible with “All men are created equal,” why did we agree to a U.S. Constitution that permitted slavery?

We are serious about expanding our own and our students’ knowledge and analytic understanding of U.S. History. Try that question out on your friends.

We imagine that the final essay (perhaps not immediately as difficult as the one above) will become a rite of passage for Michael J. Perkins fifth graders and that each year the scores on the essays will show marked improvement. Because we are a small school, we envision each of the “external” BPS teachers evaluating the fourth and fifth grade essays throughout the two years of this project. This will help us identify areas of growth and areas needing further development. It will also bring other BPS teachers into the orbit of our work. Finally, we will identify questions drawn from MCAS and the to-be-developed PARCC tests which address ELA or History standards (a.) most directly tied to this work, and (b.) where our students show greatest need for improvement. We will track our school’s improved scores on these questions in particular.

d. “Packaging” and sharing our work

In America’s schools, the intellectual work of classroom teachers typically remains within a teacher’s own classroom until her retirement. Occasionally, there may be vague understanding or acknowledgement of a few aspects of her pedagogy by other teachers in the school. The retiring teacher may hastily distribute some items of her work to colleagues in the building, but much of it ends up in cartons stored in the retiree’s basement until they are discarded by her children after her death. Sad, but true. This endless disappearance of the best work of teachers is one reasons schools have to keep “reinventing the wheel.”

It is our intention – as we develop essential questions, standards-based lessons, writing projects and daily assignments for elementary-school children – to organize and share our learning freely and without cost to interested teachers in the Boston Public Schools. We also hope to explore the possibility of “packaging” and marketing successful ideas and materials outside the Boston Public Schools with the hope of generating future revenue or grants to support ongoing curriculum improvement.

The Michael J. Perkins School has already written and published its first book of U.S. History by and for children, *Why Do We Celebrate Evacuation Day?* The book is marketed for public purchase on Amazon.com. It was prominently featured in Heinemann Publishing’s recent *Reading and Writing Genre with Purpose in K-8 Classrooms* by well-known literacy scholar Nell K. Duke, *et. al.* It is our hope that Entering History will lead to additional such projects and products in the future.

IV. Project Leadership

Barney Brawer served as principal of the Michael J. Perkins School for eight years and retired from the Boston Public Schools in June, 2013. He taught elementary school and high school in New Haven, CT and Providence, RI before serving as an elementary principal in Franklin, MA, Cambridge, MA, Putney, VT, and the Boston Public Schools.

Between his Vermont and BPS years, he was Director of the Program for Educational Change Agents at Tufts University; President of The National Classroom, Inc.; and Co-Director, with psychologist Carol Gilligan, of the Harvard Project on Boys' Development, Women's Psychology, and the Culture of Schools. He is the author of *Defining and Requiring Academic Achievement: Carnegie Units, MCAS, and the Meaning of a High School Education*. That study, commissioned by the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission, is a comprehensive analysis of the origins and first five years of MCAS testing.

Katharine Scheid is a tenured teacher in the Boston Public Schools, currently on maternity leave. She has been a classroom teacher at Orchard Gardens and Young Achievers Schools, a consultant in classroom management at Young Achievers, a Teacher in Residence at Boston's Museum of Science, and a partner with the Center for Collaborative Education to analyze MCAS data and develop family study groups to address standards-based deficits. She is certified to teach General Education (K-6), Special Education (K-8), and English Language Learners.