

The Democracy Project: Renewing History and Civics in New Hampshire Schools

“In the past four or five years, many schoolchildren coming to us do not know what the American Revolution was . . . they know almost nothing about it . . . what it was for, when it happened, or that we fought the British.”

Director of Education
New Hampshire Historical Society
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The Challenge:

As shocking as the above quote is, it is absolutely true and reflects the precipitous decline in history education among the young people of our state. This is a trend that is worrisome on several levels, the most important being that our democracy must have an educated citizenry in order to stay healthy, or even survive. Our national health requires that our citizens have a solid understanding of our common history, democratic traditions, and civic values.

The New Hampshire Historical Society has been a leader in history education for many years. Each year, the Society provides education programs to between 10,000 and 15,000 Granite State students, including 70 percent of the state’s fourth graders (fourth grade being the year traditionally devoted to the study of New Hampshire history). In the 1990s we produced the first-ever *New Hampshire History Curriculum* for grades K through 12, which has enjoyed wide use in the state’s schools. We also annually host a Colonial History Program and an Advanced Placement Conference in U.S. History for high school students.

Recently—over the past several years—we have witnessed a startling and accelerating drop in the knowledge of history among New Hampshire students. For example, **the Society has had to stop presenting its outreach program called “New Hampshire at War”** because most of the schoolchildren we see now lack the requisite baseline knowledge to understand the program. As noted above, **the students do not know what the American Revolution was or that we fought the British. They cannot list in correct chronological order the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II.**

The core issue is that, over the past decade or so, schools have significantly reduced class time for history and civics, due in part to increasing demands from programs such as No Child Left Behind, the focus on STEM subjects, and the imperative to teach to new mandatory tests. In some school districts the teaching of social studies/history/civics has been eliminated almost entirely at the elementary level. Additionally, in many cases newer classroom teachers in primary education have had reduced preparation in these subjects compared with the past. The bottom line is a dramatic erosion in basic understanding of the principles of American democracy among our students.

This issue has dramatic consequences that go far beyond producing well-rounded students. Students (our future citizens) need an understanding of how our civic institutions work so they can become fully participating citizens and educated voters. They need a basic understanding of American history to be able to contextualize problems and keep them in perspective. In short, a poor understanding of American institutions has alarming implications for American democracy and American civic values. While workforce development is an important consideration, it will do little good to have a workforce if we have lost our republic.

Reversing the Trend:

To develop a strategy to meet this crisis, over the past two years Society staff members have met and consulted with colleague organizations. Among these have been the New Hampshire Bar Association, New Hampshire Bar Foundation, New Hampshire Humanities, the New Hampshire Institute for Civics Education, and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. We also have met with the state's Board of Education, the commissioner of education, and several SAU superintendents and other educators.

As the outcome of these discussions, the Society developed a plan for reversing the decline in history and civics literacy. **A plan of action has been developed, called “The Democracy Project: Renewing History and Civics in New Hampshire Schools.” The initiative has three focus areas: curriculum and content development, teacher training, and advocacy at the state and local levels.**

Regarding curriculum development, we will begin to address this crisis by revising and reintroducing the New Hampshire history and civics curriculum at the elementary level. New Hampshire schools currently use the **K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Framework**, which was adopted by the state Department of Education (NHDOE) in 2006. The Framework is vague, has no accountability mechanism, and is not aligned with current standards. **Common Core, which came into use around 2010, has no social studies component.** Rather, social studies is supposed to be incorporated into the English Language Arts as secondary material. Thus even those elementary schools that aspire to offering a robust social studies curriculum are hamstrung by out-of-date standards and nonaligned curriculum material.

The Society has secured grant funding from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and the Cogswell Benevolent Trust to begin to develop an updated state history curriculum for elementary schools that will be provided at no charge to schools. (More funding will be needed to complete the new curriculum, but this is a good start.) The curriculum will offer a wealth of resources adaptable for a full year of instruction or in shorter units, and it will be accessible in multiple formats, from digital to print, thus allowing school districts the flexibility to tailor social studies instruction to their larger curricular needs. Having this resource available for teachers will be an important step in encouraging a renewal of classroom time spent on history and will address much of the current deficiencies in available curricular materials in grades K through 5 education, as there are currently almost no aligned resources on state and local history for this age group. The Society will also work with school districts throughout the state to ensure that all districts have pedagogically sound social studies criteria for elementary education.

In the area of teacher training and development, the Society will offer teachers professional development opportunities in state history, primarily through summer seminars and workshops. Such opportunities will make it possible to train hundreds of teachers every summer while allowing them to earn continuing education units, which is a professional obligation for every teacher in the state. Also, by working with the state's college programs in teacher certification, these offerings will make it possible to train incoming elementary school teachers in state history and its role in primary school education.

The area of advocacy is complex. We have consulted with the NHDOE and the state's Board of Education, but the capacity of these entities to make progress in reversing the history and civics decline is limited. The NHDOE's social studies coordinator retired in 2015 and was not replaced due to budget constraints. Most authority over curriculum decisions resides at the local level.

Recently the Society was instrumental in crafting a legislative bill (Senate Bill 45) that created a high school civics requirement. However, even though it passed, our expectations for this legislation are low based on prior experience. Such state curriculum requirements are not tracked for compliance and are typically not followed by most school districts.

The reality is that the major impetus for change will need to come at the local level, brought about by direct contact with school superintendents, principals, school boards, curriculum coordinators, and teachers. (As noted above, New Hampshire is predominately a local control state in terms of its educational system.) This will require a labor-intensive, "retail" advocacy effort with the state's SAUs (School Administrative Units). While this effort will be a substantial undertaking, it can be accomplished with sufficient resources. **For this we plan to collaborate with the New Hampshire Bar Association, which will be partnering with us to provide the needed man/woman power for the project.**

Virtually every community in the state has among its community leaders a member of the Bar, and the Bar Association will recruit from these ranks individuals to personally undertake the advocacy effort in his or her local community on a volunteer basis. To coordinate a large-scale volunteer initiative such as this will require a staff person to handle the logistics, including recruitment, message development, training, scheduling, and follow-up. With good organization and follow-through we are optimistic that real results will be achieved in terms of our objective: to reinstate vibrant social studies instruction in New Hampshire schools.

Project Funding and Implementation

The needed fundraising for this project is \$1.2 million. This will enable the funding of a four-year project at the rate of \$300,000 per year. This budget will pay for the hiring for three project positions in curriculum and content development, teacher training, advocacy, reimbursement of Society staff time for the project, completion of the new curriculum, office expenses, and stipends for teachers' training. We plan to hire for the three project positions in January 2018. Beginning then, the program will run for a minimum of four years, with progress being assessed annually.

The New Hampshire Historical Society Overview

Since its founding in 1823, the New Hampshire Historical Society has been the leading force in collecting, preserving, and sharing New Hampshire's rich history. The Society is one of the oldest historical societies in the country and one of New Hampshire's longest established institutions. It is the repository of much of the state's cultural and historical inheritance. We are the de facto presidential library of President Franklin Pierce and hold extensive collections from other leading American figures such as Daniel Webster and Supreme Court Justice David Souter. In addition, our artifacts and records tell the stories of the many immigrants and ordinary people who contributed to the development of our culture over the past 400 years.

Our mission is to educate a diverse public—with special emphasis on students in grades K through 12—about the significance of New Hampshire's past and its relationship to their lives today. Our collections, the saved history of New Hampshire, make us unique. They document New Hampshire life and provide a firm foundation and wealth of raw materials for the work of researchers, genealogists, collectors, and students of New Hampshire history.

Through a recent \$7 million capital campaign (2013–16) the Society was able to invest in a major digitization initiative, allowing local historical societies and libraries from communities throughout New Hampshire to share their historical collections through a powerful new website.

Summary

Alarms concerning a decline in civics literacy among American citizens have been sounding nationally for several years. This issue rises above partisan politics. Addressing it will require multiple strategies. One such strategy is to make sure that our students learn the common history that unites us as a people and comprehend the basic building blocks of our system of government.

New Hampshire plays a unique role in the national body politic, one that requires our citizens to be well-informed and knowledgeable in American norms and ideals. Such a role confers a special obligation to see that our students are properly educated in history and civics so that they, too, may one day contribute to the civic life of New Hampshire and the nation. But with so many of the state's children not receiving this educational opportunity, New Hampshire is in jeopardy of forfeiting one of its defining distinctions in the modern era. The ambitious project described here seeks to solve this problem.

We would be pleased to provide further details related to any aspect of the project as needed.