



# Why Learning History Matters Now

The Value of History Education

2015

# The Rhode Island Historical Society

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The Rhode Island Historical Society's Mission:

Honoring, interpreting  
and sharing Rhode Island's  
past to enrich the present  
and inspire the future.



*Theater Curtain from the Providence Theater, c. 1812  
Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*

# THE VALUE OF HISTORY EDUCATION



*High School, Providence, c. 1896  
Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*

“Knowledge of U.S. history is invaluable. All of these students will be voters ... They will be making decisions in the voting booth that influence our lives. They should be well informed and capable of weighing the contending claims of candidates, especially when the candidates rest their arguments on historical precedent.”

- Diane Ravitch, professor of education at NYU <sup>12</sup>

# VALUE OF HISTORY EDUCATION

History education is getting short shrift in Rhode Island classrooms. But our students need to know about their past now more than ever.

Teachers today find it difficult to devote adequate time to history because, unlike English Language Arts (ELA)/literacy or math, social studies, which includes history, geography, economics, and civics & government, is not tested at the state level.

Yet, when students study history, their performance improves across all subjects, including ELA and mathematics. When they engage with primary sources, students become equipped with 21st-century skills, such as the ability to think critically and communicate effectively, that are crucial to their successful performance in school.

Moreover, when we provide our students with effective history education, we prepare them to excel as college students, as members of the workforce, and as citizens ready to engage in their communities.

Primary sources and the “informational texts” required by Common Core standards (defined as argument or persuasion, expository, literary nonfiction, and procedural texts) are the history museum’s bread-and-butter, but funding cuts have made it difficult for students to gain access to these materials through traditional field trips.

Further, teachers have little time to locate and evaluate resources, particularly those pertaining to local history. As a result, students miss out on the opportunity to learn about the history of where they live and develop strong ties to their community.

At the Rhode Island Historical Society, we hold that effective history education -- taught by well-trained teachers using rich historical materials -- helps students to build 21st-century skills, encourages them to feel empathy for others, and instills in them a sense of pride in Rhode Island.

Through the continued efforts to engage with schools through programs at the Museum of Work & Culture, the John Brown House Museum, and the Library as well as new initiatives including the development of a Rhode Island History Digital Textbook and an Anchor School program, we are committed to strengthening history education in our state.

# WHY STUDY HISTORY?

A recent study conducted on behalf of National History Day (NHD), a highly regarded national competition for middle-school and high-school students, has shown that history education positively affects students in a number of important ways.

Studying history:



*fully prepares students to do college-level research*

NHD students' ability to find, evaluate, and use information exceeds their peers, hones critical thinking skills so that students are able to digest, analyze, and synthesize information. In interviews, NHD students said that reading challenging texts gave them the "skills and confidence to tackle tough reading assignments in other subjects," including ELA, science, and math. In fact, NHD students for whom English is a second language and who are first-generation college students, "welcome the challenge of college reading assignments" after having participated in NHD.



*hones skills that are transferable to other academic subjects*

NHD students often outperform their peers on standardized assessments in reading, science, and math. For example, in Texas, NHD students tested more than twice as well on standardized tests as non-NHD students, and an average of nearly two thirds of NHD students had "commended" performance each year compared to an average of 19 percent of non-NHD students.



*finding and evaluation information*

An overwhelming majority of alumni say NHD had a clear impact on research and communication skills, and many volunteered examples of how they not only arrived on campus well-equipped to do college work, but continued to use the skills acquired through NHD in their careers.

Because of having engaged so closely with history in secondary school, NHD students:



*improved their writing skills*



*developed oral communication and presentation skills*



*discovered the merits of collaboration*



*learned time-management skills, problem-solving skills, and perseverance*



*increased their interest in other academic subjects*

# WHAT OUR TEACHERS HAVE TO SAY

*TAH teachers using primary sources to develop unit plans*



Teachers are eager to incorporate more primary sources in their history instruction. We can support their efforts by continuing to provide content-rich resources that allow educators to teach across subject areas and connect examples of local history to those with national importance.

Christina Louth, a History teacher at North Providence High School, says that she needs “access to reliable primary and secondary sources that can translate to the needs and abilities of high school aged students.” Louth acknowledges that as much as there are many “incredible sources on the internet, it can become a difficult and tedious task for a high school teacher to take long historical documents and make sure the readability level is in tune with the ability of the 21st-century high school student.” Louth expressed that history educators struggle to make “historical content meaningful for high school students who live in a technological world” and the format of a digital textbook, which the Rhode Island Historical Society is currently developing, could work to resolve this issue.

Valerie Carnevale, a history teacher at North Smithfield Middle School, cites several challenges currently facing her fellow teachers, including limited access to ideal resources and budget cuts. She writes:

*Our aging textbooks provide an over-arching story of history, but rarely gives the depth our students need. Additionally, it only provides text for a few of the most famous primary sources (Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, etc). The textbooks provide some connection to National History Standards, but our Rhode Island state standards are much more focused on local history, which our book does not address.*

*As teachers, we then spend much of our time researching. Many sites have long videos of historians lecturing about national events, but we rarely have the time and our students rarely have the attention spans for the video. It is relatively easy for us to find primary and secondary sources about national events, but much more difficult to show the Rhode Island connection.*

Carnevale underscores the need for vetted, readily available resources pertaining to local and national history that history and heritage organizations like the Rhode Island Historical Society are perfectly positioned to provide.

*Our aging textbooks provide an over-arching story of history, but rarely gives the depth our students need.* - Lincoln High School teacher

# A CALL TO ACTION

We at the Rhode Island Historical Society are committed to strengthening history education in Rhode Island in the following ways:



Continue to develop RI history and civics curriculum with the Rhode Island Department of Education and local school districts;



Expand online resources through the continued digitization of primary sources and explore the potential of an online RI history textbook;



Grow the All-Ability Inclusive Program at the Museum of Work & Culture to include the John Brown House Museum, as well as implementing programming for those with visual and hearing impairment; and



Create an Anchor Schools Program in which a new district is chosen each year to be the RIHS School District—with an accompanying suite of resources for students, teachers, and local historic sites.

To fully and sustainably support our teachers and provide enriching experiences for students, we need the help of local and state officials, funders, donors, parents, and community members.

Will you help us to make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students -- our future voters, policy-makers and community leaders?

For more information about how you can help, please contact:  
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# REFERENCES

1. Soboroff, Jacob. "If Students Fail History, Does It Matter?" CNN. 28 July 2011. [http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/07/26/education.history.soboroff/index.html?hpt=hp\\_bn1](http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/07/26/education.history.soboroff/index.html?hpt=hp_bn1).
2. Rockman, et al. "National History Day Works: Findings from the National Program Evaluation." 2011. <http://www.nhd.org/NHDworks.htm>.