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# Engaging Public School Teachers: Teaching American History

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Ronald G. Helms is a full professor, **one of two national auditors for NCSS\_National Council For Accreditation Of Teacher Education** Program Reviews, a member of **National Council For Accreditation Of Teacher Education Board of Examiners**, **National Board for Professional Teacher Standards** facilitator, the Principal Investigator at Wright State University for a NBPTS institute; Helms has assisted over 500 NBPTS candidates, and has offered several national presentations on the NBPTS process. Helms is the recipient of 45+ grants including a \$916,000 **Teaching American History** Grant from the U. S. Department of Education. Helms is active with OCSS and NCSS for the past 40 years and currently is serving on the NCSS Social Education Committee and the Conference Committee.

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# Engaging Public School Teachers: Teaching American History

## The University and Public School Dialogue

Wright State University's College of Education and Human Services is formally involved in the ongoing process to bring about systemic change in preK-Higher education. No partnership can exist where only one partner grows and benefits. As Goodlad (1994) emphasized in *Educational Renewal: Better Teachers, Better Schools*, working together must be mutually advantageous.

In order to further the Dayton Public Schools and Wright State University Partnership effort, a written Partnership Agreement is in place. This Agreement serves as a working document to articulate the purposes and direction of the Dayton Public School collaboration. The four partnership purposes established are used as the baseline:

1. Creating and sustaining learning communities that enables preK-12 learners and partners to construct meaningful knowledge;
  2. Preparing educators;
  3. Providing professional development;
  4. Conducting inquiry
- <http://ieiseattle.org/Publications/compact.htm> \_

The establishment of Dayton Public Schools partnership has created a preK-12 forum for urban teacher pre-service opportunities as well as a preK-12 forum for urban teacher in-service opportunities.

### **An initial project: The Nearby History Institute**

Many citizens and students share Henry Ford's declaration that "history is more or less bunk (<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/182100.html>.)" However, this attitude continues to confound and challenge professors and teachers. Ford may have been contemptuous of "traditional history," but he clearly knew that events in the workplace and the community were significant. Henry Ford spent millions of dollars to preserve history. Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford museum in Dearborn, Michigan is one of Ford's greatest legacies (The Henry Ford: America's Greatest History Attraction, <http://www.hfmgv.org/>.)

The institute was offered to teachers in the Dayton Public Schools. The Nearby History Institute is an integral part of this process of assisting teachers to connect local history resources and research with Ohio social studies standards.

The focus of Nearby History Institute is the study of the history of Dayton, Ohio, and also includes the study of the Ohio Bicentennial and the centennial of the Wright brothers' first flight.

The institute focused on integrating local history resources and research across the K-12 social studies and language arts curriculum. Given the area's history and the exciting public history partners, this project viewed Dayton and the surrounding Miami Valley area a laboratory for engaging students in an exciting and meaningful exploration of the American experience.

## **The Dayton Teaching American History Grant**

The success of the Nearby History Institute is prelude to a \$915,000.00 Teaching American History project that will continue to sustain education for a democracy: The Dayton American History grant. This grant is a federally funded project that extended from October 2002 to June 2006. Several components of the Teaching American History Project are currently sustained, and will benefit Dayton teachers and students into the future.

The Teaching American History grants are highly competitive federal grants that may be awarded to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in partnership with universities, humanities organizations, libraries, or museums.

While experience and confidence apply to the grant writers, an initial sense of euphoria was the initial reaction of the partnership members. \$915,000.00 is one of the largest humanities grants that the Dayton partnership, The History Department, or the College of Education and Human Services has ever achieved.

### **Implementation of The Dayton Teaching American History Grant**

The early October notification of the Dayton Teaching American History grant meant that Dayton Public School history teachers must be consulted very soon. Traditionally, The Western Ohio Education Association (WOEA) a fall in-service program for teachers. The Dayton Teaching American History project directors immediately scheduled an

October WOEa planning meeting, followed by a November planning meeting and a December celebration at the Carillon Park Museum Education Center.

The Dayton teachers are ecstatic about receiving the grant dollars, and the project directors know it is important that the teachers take ownership of the grant. From the very beginning the Dayton Teaching American History project solicits the needs and curriculum concerns of the teachers. The focus of the federal grant is to provide resources for educators to improve the teaching of American history. The university project directors are committed to working directly with the Dayton educators as colleagues.

The unique aspect of the Dayton Teaching American History project is that for the very first time, the history curriculum and the history teachers are targeted to receive resources and materials that exceed the wildest dreams of the teachers. Science, math, reading, and special education grants are numerous (and necessary), and the realization of a history project inspires the Dayton teachers to design curriculum, review and purchase resources, and given a period of reflection to envision newer possibilities.

The Dayton Teaching American History project provides respect and appreciation for teaching American history, and the teachers realize that Dayton Teaching American History project is a very unique opportunity. The project directors are mindful that sustainability is an important goal as well. From the beginning, the teachers are urged to envision a strategy to provide revisions to a ten-year old curriculum that has not yet been

aligned with the current Ohio Curriculum Standards; teachers are encouraged to develop projects that will continue with the termination of grant dollars.

Upon notice of receipt of the grant, the project directors carefully refined a job description to specify the requirements for the project coordinator to be an American history Ph.D. who will be a “teacher in residence” in the Dayton Public schools. All three project directors have abundance experience with urban education; it is clear that another layer of bureaucracy is not useful to teachers. The project coordinator while holding a Ph.D. must exhibit excellent people skills, gain the trust of teachers and students, design curriculum, support urbane teaching, and be a lead American history teacher in grades 5 – 11.

There were numerous applications from Ohio for this position, and all applicants held a Ph.D. in history. However, an essential part of the application processes involved model classroom teaching as well as an interview process by the teachers. The Dayton Teaching American History project coordinator was hired very early during the delivery of the project to the Dayton teachers.

### **The Dayton Teaching American History Project Performance Data**

The quality of project evaluation was contracted to an external evaluator from the Wright State University Center of Urban and Public Affairs. The assessment process addressed the following questions:

Has American history teaching improved?

How many Dayton teachers obtained National Board Certification?

Is the Dayton curriculum aligned with appropriate state and national standards?

Have Wright State University history professors have an impact on the teaching of American History?

Have peer observation and consultation had an impact on American history education?

Have mentoring and team teaching had an impact on American history education?

Has the provision of technology and technology training in American history assisted the teachers of American history?

What support provided under the grant has been most effective?

The final report to the U.S. Department of Education provides numerous quantitative data that measures target as well as actual performance data. One performance measure is number of teachers receiving coaching by an historian in the classroom. The target was 40 and the actual performance data is 97, well exceeding the target number.

Out of a target population of 120 American history teachers, 155 teachers participated in Teaching American History professional development, a participation rate of 100% (due to changes in teaching assignments, new Individuals were drawn in each year, thus exceeding the 120 teacher target.)

In nearly all cases, the Dayton Public schools teachers benefited in measurable ways by



the intervention of the Dayton Teaching American History project.

The Dayton Teaching American History project coordinator delivered 479 hours of coaching and one-on-one assistance to all 120 Dayton American history teachers in their classrooms.

The independent evaluator required by the Teaching American History Project provides detailed and quantitative data on each of the initial questions. The independent evaluator was provided assessments of each Teaching American History Project event or activity. Teachers directly assessed events like field trips to Williamsburg, the new Dayton history curriculum, and professional development days. The independent evaluator developed several instruments that were consistently used in classroom assessment by trained graduate assistants from the Center of Urban and Public Affairs.

The independent evaluator restructured the initial questions in order to provide quantitative data. We can document that six Dayton teachers obtained National Board Certification because of Teaching American History Project support. A question “Has American history teaching improved?” is more complicated even given an independent evaluator. An obvious complication is that the set of 120 teachers in year one is not identical to the set of 120 teachers in year three or year four. There is simply greater mobility in the Dayton public School teaching profession than in suburban or rural settings.

The question “Is the Dayton curriculum aligned with appropriate state and national

standards?” merits a solid yes, and both paper and WWW documentation exists to support an affirmative answer.

Rather than to provide direct and or indirect answers to the all of the following questions, the project directors are providing selected commentary from the independent evaluator’s report:

Has American history teaching improved?

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Have Wright State University history professors have an impact on the teaching of American History?

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What support provided under the grant has been most effective?

#### Attendance, participation, and involvement of all history teachers in TAH-sponsored events

Increasing teacher involvement in Teaching American History activities became a major objective of the project shortly after it debuted in 2002. The project evaluator pinpointed low enrollments in project activities as an early concern....

Over the three year period of the grant, 155 individuals (unduplicated count) actually participated.

Teachers are acting as mentors. The Teaching American History Fellows are serving as mentors to other DPS teachers and are a central aspect of the legacy, both formally and informally.

Western Ohio Educators Day (WOEA Day) is a regional professional development day that all Dayton Public Schools teachers participate. The Dayton Teaching American History Project developed a special WOEA Day conference about teaching American history and presented it every fall during the project. The Dayton TAH Project successfully used WOEA Day as a venue for discussing American history content and teaching strategies. Teaching Fellows took responsibility for preparing and presenting much of the content in the conference. Conference luncheon speakers included Dr. Cathy Gorn, executive director of National History Day, and historical re-enactor Sojourner Truth. Overall satisfaction with the sessions each year approached a 5 on a 5 point scale.

In 2005, the project offered “Teaching About Early American Historic Sites: Virginia, the Chesapeake, and Washington, D.C.” Dr. Ron Helms of Wright State University taught this institute, which included a trip to the Chesapeake region and sites such as Gettysburg National Battlefield, Smithsonian’s American History Program, D.C. war memorials, Mt. Vernon, Manassas, Colonial Williamsburg, and the National Road Zane Grey Museum. The project also

offered “Philadelphia and the Constitution,” led by project coordinator and historian Dr. Julieanne Phillips.

Overall satisfaction with the field institutes was a 5 on a 5 point scale.

All findings of the independent evaluator are available from TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY FINAL PERFORMANCE CFDA#84.215X PR/Award#S215X020474 Budget Period #1 Report Type:Final Performance

### **The Dayton Teaching American History Project Professional Development**

Teaching and especially urban education is demanding, emotionally draining, rewarding, and frequently exhausting. Often teachers with excellent intentions may not be willing at the day’s end to attend a history seminar at a local university. Not all university professors are adroit enough to connect with exhausted teachers for an evening seminar. Following a brief experiment with the “sage on the stage” approach, the project directors acknowledged that more emphasis must be placed in the setting and during defined district professional days.

Dayton Public Schools “history fellows” were volunteer cohorts of teachers who exhibited unusual stamina as well as a deep thirst for historical knowledge and pedagogy. When other grants invited national historical scholars to address Dayton area academic historians, the project directors provided special pedagogical seminars for educators. Teachers were always included at these professional banquets at no charge. The project directors arranged for teachers to attend annual OAH and NCSS conferences.

Project directors drafted a proposal for several Dayton Public Schools teachers to present at their very first national conference at NCSS in Kansas City. Mini-field trips were offered for overnight visits to local and out of state historical conferences and historical site.

Major field trips to Boston, San Jose, Philadelphia, Gettysburg, Washington, D.C, Yorktown, Jamestown, and Williamsburg offered free college credit, free meals and lodging, free transportation, as well as stipends to purchase classroom resource materials.

Special events were held at ThinkTV, on WOEa day, and “spring flings,” provided day-long in-service programs often featuring teacher presentations. Teacher mentoring provided paid release time for teachers to visit other history classrooms. Various history book groups are scheduled for the future.

A “spring fling” and the fall WOEa day were professional in-service days designed by Dayton history teachers and implemented by the project directors and coordinator. The Teaching American History Project held one annual Spring Fling at the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Park Wright Cycle Complex. The Fling features new and engaging resources and approaches to teaching American history. Teachers learned "Revolution," a multiplayer role-playing game set during the American War for Independence, received standards-aligned curriculum and information for field trips, and toured the museum.

Over fifty American history and social studies teachers and staff gathered at Sinclair Community College in October (during the TAH project) to share history projects and ideas. Teachers presented sessions on a wide range of American history topics and learned about new approaches to content. Following lunch, the project provided awards for special achievement to the teachers and provided speaker-actors like Sojourner Truth to inspire the teachers.

### **The Dayton Teaching American History Project Sustainability**

Two outstanding legacies of the Dayton Teaching American History Project are the Dayton Teaching American History WWW site and adoption of National History Day as a curricular event in the Dayton Public schools.

An online lesson bank of 300 deeply-aligned American history lessons, created by an historian from trusted sources such as the National Archives and Library of Congress, is available to all Dayton Public School teachers twenty-four hours a day at the Teaching American History WWW site. This Teaching American History WWW site provides American history curriculum and lesson plans for grades 5, 8, and 9 at [http://www.dps.k12.oh.us/academic/secsoc/americanhistory/teaching\\_01.htm](http://www.dps.k12.oh.us/academic/secsoc/americanhistory/teaching_01.htm).

Project directors were careful to solicit teacher decisions and review of the new Dayton Public School history curriculum, lessons, and web site. Dayton Public School teachers, ThinkTV and Wright State University professors came together at the Teacher Education Council meeting at Wright State University, where their work on lesson planning was

featured. A cohort of teachers spent several days at Wright State reviewing curriculum on a regular basis. Project directors and teachers consistently updated the Teacher Education Council. At one of these formal Teacher Education Council (TEC), the Dayton teachers were joined at the TEC lunch by the Dayton Public Schools superintendent. Later the superintendent introduced the Dayton teacher to the full TEC. The Dayton Public Schools superintendent in an article for the Dayton Daily News credited the Teaching American History grant as a primary factor in raising district state tests scores.

An energetic National History Day program is in place in the Dayton Public Schools and is growing larger by each year. With over 500 students participating in the first year, 78 students progressed to statewide competition, and several students progressed to national and recognition.

The theme for National History Day varies each year. The American History Grant enabled and encouraged Dayton Public schools to initiate National History Day competition in 2003. The event is very successful. National History Day competition is an annual event, and is a legacy of the Dayton Teaching American History project.

The competition has grown to include students in a dozen of Dayton schools. Breakfast and briefing began at 8:00AM followed by the judging at 9:00 to 12:00 p.m.

The College of education at Wright State University continues to provide a local grant to provide an evening dinner institute for teachers. Social studies education candidates from Wright State University provide the cadre of judges required for a successful National History Day competition.

### **The Dayton Teaching American History Project updates for 2009 and 2010**

The Dayton Teaching American History Project directors were instructed by the grant to omit student achievement on standardized tests as an objective or goal. Nevertheless, Dr. Percy Mack, superintendent, of the Dayton Public Schools observed that Ohio Department of Education testing results at various grades levels have increased and are continuing to increase.

155 Dayton Public School teachers were directly involved in the Dayton Teaching American History Project. While perhaps eight to ten percent of these teachers have retired or have moved, the contagion of best practices affects teaching history in the Dayton Public Schools.

An active history book group meets regularly with an attendance of 20-30 history teachers. The twenty-seven high quality American history lessons written by Dayton Public Schools history teachers and a lesson bank of 300 deeply-aligned history lessons form the core of history instruction in the Dayton Public Schools.



Every year there is an increase in the number of Dayton Public School history teachers and history students who participate in the annual National History Day competition. Several Dayton Public School National History Day continue to advance to Ohio competition, and it is not unusual for one – three teams to advance to national competition.

The author continues to serve as a state and national consultant, grant writer, and Teaching American History assessor for various projects. The Dayton Teaching American History Project has proved that the merits and achievement of the project has survived following the expenditures of the grant dollars.

### **The Dayton Teaching American History Project Conclusion**

The Dayton Teaching American History Project is an exemplar partnership of university faculty in the arts, university education faculty and the public school setting faculty to achieve the four partnership purposes:

1. Creating and sustaining learning communities that enables preK-12 learners and partners to construct meaningful knowledge;
2. Preparing educators;
3. Providing professional development;
4. Conducting inquiry

Experience, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, state of the art use of technology, the ability to embrace diversity, demonstrated emotional intelligence, and acknowledgement of the professionalism of the setting partners is the conceptual framework that guided the success of the tripartite history projects and fostered the agenda for education in a democracy.

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