U.S. History: Our Worst Subject?
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Testimony

On behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, I would like to thank the members of the subcommittee for this opportunity to testify on how to strengthen American history and civics in our schools.

Classroom teachers are not the only ones responsible for ensuring that our children understand our history and the duties of citizenship. All of us in the scholarly community have an obligation to assist in this effort. The Smithsonian—with its nine research centers, eighteen museums, hundreds of scholars, and millions of artifacts—has a special obligation. My purpose today is to describe the unique opportunities the Smithsonian offers teachers of American history and civics, and to share with you some of the things we have learned from those teachers.

As director of the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies, I have the privilege of overseeing the Smithsonian's museum-based education programs and our educational outreach initiatives. Today I would like to tell you about three aspects of our work: professional-development programs for teachers, curriculum development, and programs that reach students directly in classrooms nationwide.

Professional Development

The Smithsonian offers in-depth weeklong history seminars in Washington, D.C., and workshops in communities across the country. Usually, we develop these programs in partnership with a school district, or with an organization like Advanced Placement College Board. Recently, our work with school districts in Arizona, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, and North Carolina has been supported by Teaching American History Grants administered by the U. S. Department of Education. From such collaborations, we know that teachers, particularly at the elementary school level, need to build their subject knowledge. The average elementary-school teacher takes only one college course in American history.

In a Smithsonian program, a teacher can peer over a historian's shoulder as, together, they do the detective work of primary-source scholarship. Imagine a teacher from San Francisco working side-by-side with a Smithsonian forensic anthropologist to gather clues about life in colonial Jamestown from newly unearthed skeletons. Or imagine this teacher working with a curator to examine wet-plate photographs of San Francisco in the Gold Rush days of the 1850s. Then imagine these teachers learning how to recreate this excitement in their own classrooms, using local objects or documents. All in all, the

Smithsonian offered 71 of these kinds of professional development programs in Fiscal Year 2004, reaching 57,000 teachers nationwide.

It is particularly rewarding when the Smithsonian is able to deepen a teacher's understanding of the history of his or her own community. The Smithsonian, as a national institution, is not only devoted to history on a national level, but also to the history of a nation composed of communities—the history of all of us. All of these experiences generate excitement and a renewed commitment to the teaching of American history. Just last week, a teacher reported that a Smithsonian workshop inspired her to enroll in a college course in U.S. history. We regard this as a success story, but we know it is not the end of the journey. Her renewed enthusiasm will be passed on, in incalculable ways, to her students. We all know that it takes an inspired teacher to inspire students.

Curriculum Development

Our curriculum materials, too, are based on Smithsonian scholarship, and they are available to every teacher in the country, regardless of whether or not the teacher is able to visit the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. Our central education Web site, SmithsonianEducation.org, is a gateway to nearly a thousand lesson plans, activity ideas, and teaching resources. This fall, we will unveil a new Web site, SmithsonianSource.org, devoted exclusively to American history and civics. It will contain resources for building subject knowledge and improving teaching skills. With content selected and evaluated by teachers, and aligned with history standards in select states, SmithsonianSource.org will include images of primary sources, document-based questions, lesson plans, and video clips that bring Smithsonian historians into the classroom.

Let me give you an example of the kinds of curriculum resources we create here at the Smithsonian. As you might know, the National Museum of American History recently opened a major new permanent exhibition, The Price of Freedom: Americans at War, which shows how wars have shaped our nation's history and transformed American society. At the museum's Web site, teachers can download lesson plans and can order a free DVD related to the exhibition. But the Smithsonian is such a vast and various institution that the teacher need not stop there. He may visit several other Smithsonian museum websites to find additional resources—writing activities based on the personal experiences of soldiers and their families, primary sources that document the contributions of African American aviators, and enormous collections of artworks and music clips that bring alive the cultural climate of the time.

We disseminate this work through our bi-annual publication, Smithsonian in Your Classroom, to all elementary and middle schools in the United States. Each issue includes a background essay, lesson plan, images from our collection and recommended resources. Lessons guide students as they examine, for example, currency from the colonial era, children's letters from Japanese American internment camps, and Native American dolls from different regions. We also make these resources available to more than 4,000 teachers who attend our annual Teachers' Night in Washington, D.C., and select cities around the country.

Outreach to Classrooms and Students

Distance-learning technology is opening our doors to an even larger audience nationwide, taking our scholarship and collections directly to students through virtual field trips, broadcasts, and point-to-point conferencing. Students can see for themselves our nation's treasures and go behind-the-scenes to watch Smithsonian historians at work. This year, virtual field trips enabled thousands of schoolchildren to participate in the historic opening of the National Museum of the American Indian; thousands more viewed the Wright Brothers' Flyer at the National Air and Space Museum and learned about the history of flight through interactive online experiments. Through real-time "video visits," students have a chance to view artworks depicting the American Revolution and to discuss the works with curators from the Smithsonian American Art Museum. These technologies also enable students to see the plants and animals that Lewis and Clark found on their expedition and read the journal entries describing these discoveries. Access to these primary sources can have a profound impact on the imagination and curiosity of students.

The Smithsonian can also serve as a virtual gathering place for students to talk about the issues that will become tomorrow's history lessons. Through our annual Talkback Classroom video-conference program, students in Washington, D.C., hold discussions with students in Canberra, Australia. Topics have included the meaning of citizenship and the challenge of forging a national identity among citizens of varying backgrounds and cultures. To supplement these student-to-student exchanges, U.S. students attend workshops with Smithsonian curators and historians, study Smithsonian resources, and take part in online conversations. The program culminates in the live videoconference in which students interview a prominent elected official.

It may come as a surprise that even our science-focused museums and research centers are helping to improve students' civic skills, by showing them the ways in which scientific research and inquiry inform policy. For example, our Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama works with students and teachers to help them understand the connection between biodiversity research and international environmental policies. The National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center teaches students scientific methods for monitoring the health and diversity of plants and animals in their own communities. These experiences are preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Conclusion

The Smithsonian works with education-leadership organizations to better understand and serve the needs of students and teachers. We are currently seeking formal partnerships with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Officials in these organizations have confirmed that there is a great need for the kinds of professional-development training and distance-learning programs the Smithsonian can offer.

Throughout its history, the Smithsonian has been devoted to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” It is a weighty mandate. I hope that I have conveyed, in this brief overview, the ways we are fulfilling the mandate by reaching out to schools across the country. I commend the committee for its efforts to improve American history and civics education, and thus to equip students with the knowledge and skill to shape their own future. I welcome the chance to assist you in any way I can. Thank you.