

Now that America's children have returned to school for another year of reading, writing and arithmetic, many parents find themselves looking for new and creative ways to augment, at home, the education their kids are receiving in the classroom.

Thanks to its comprehensive education initiative, the United States Mint offers parents and educators a wide range of complementary learning tools, all of which are available at their H.I.P. Pocket Change™ website, www.usmint.com/kids.

Here parents, teachers and students alike can discover, through our Nation's coinage, so much about the history of the United States of America. Comprehensive and compelling lesson plans are available for all students in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade. The newest lesson plans available tell the story of the Westward Journey Nickel Series™, a beautiful set of four circulating nickels, two in 2004 and two in 2005, struck to commemorate the bicentennials of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806.

Additionally, multiple lesson plans have been developed to highlight the state quarters issued in every year of the popular 50 State Quarters® Program, from 1999 through 2004. All of the lesson plans can be downloaded directly from the website and may be freely duplicated and distributed. A handy, printable Teachers Guide is also available to help both parents and educators navigate the website and take full advantage of its many features.

There are dozens of puzzles to solve and games to play for children of all ages who visit the website. Lively animations teach viewers the details of the manufacturing process with cartoon such as "The Birth of a Coin" and "Coins of the World." And every month a new coin is featured as the United States Mint's Coin of the Month.

One of the newest H.I.P. Pocket Change projects to be completed is the Inspector Collector's Coin Course, a five part series of coin collecting workshops that guide students through such elements of collecting as proper coin identification, the importance of coin condition as well as the best methods of caring for and storing a coin collection.

Inspector Collector, that sly old fox, is just one of many animated characters created by the United States Mint to help spread its message of the enormous educational value of money. Some of Inspector Collector's pals include Peter the Mint Eagle, Plinky the Mint Pig, Goldie the Mint Fish and Nero the Mint Police Dog. While most of these characters are completely fictional, both Peter and Nero have as their inspiration real counterparts tied directly to the history of the United States Mint.

Peter was a real bald eagle who, from 1830 to 1836, lived at the first Philadelphia Mint facility. Legend has it that he used to fly around the city during the day. Then, after getting his daily exercise, he'd return to the United States Mint before the building was locked up at night. When he died, a taxidermist mounted him in an acrylic case. Even today, you can still find Peter at his beloved Philadelphia home.

Nero was the first watchdog at the United States Mint. On January 6, 1793, the United States Mint paid three dollars for him - a lot of money for a dog back when many people earned a dollar or less for a whole day's work. Legend has it that an old version of the United States Treasury seal, from around 1800, shows Nero guarding the key to a Mint strongbox. The same key hangs safely from the collar of Nero's animated descendant today.