

AASLH 250th Task Force
White Paper for History Education
October 21, 2019

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...

The words of the Declaration of Independence will take center stage in 2026 during America's 250th anniversary. We can use this moment to promote stronger history education to foster a better understanding of what this nation has achieved, and propel it toward the fulfillment of the founder's ideals. While the country has changed, the ideals of the revolutionary era have remained powerful and relevant.

Our mission is to help every young person see themselves in this history, no matter when or where their families joined the American story. Effective history education provides context and nuance through an active and inclusive examination of our shared past in all its beauty, tragedy, and complexity.

Historical organizations, government, the education community, and the public must play an integral role in discussing, developing and implementing a range of initiatives to lift the country's awareness of its history. We must have bold moves in measured steps.

OUR REVOLUTIONARY GOALS

1. Raise History's Profile

The 250th presents an unmatched opportunity to reverse recent trends in education that deemphasize history and the humanities. Through legislative and fiscal measures, school boards and legislatures must re-commit to the teaching of history -- broadly understood -- at all levels. Community and citizen-led organizations who advocate for history education must organize and lobby policy makers and Congressional delegations to invigorate public commitment to history education generally. These efforts must include a drive to reinstitute a new version of the *Teaching American History* grant program by 2026.

AASLH must capitalize on national and local attention on the anniversary to advocate for the advancement of history education. Institutions nationwide will also benefit from the heightened publicity surrounding the 250th to promote events and activities such as museum exhibits, school fairs, public programs, and community commemorations.

The entertainment industry provides an important vehicle to actively engage popular culture with events of the American Revolution. With the planned revival of the musical "1776" and the continued success of "Hamilton," theater and the arts can draw attention to the myriad historical activities that the 250th will bring. Additionally, broadcast companies such as TCM, PBS, and Sundance can promote films about U.S. history writ large and explore the impact of

revolutionary ideas. These developments will offer new opportunities for collaboration with arts education efforts in local schools.

2. Ensure Inclusivity

It is imperative that education efforts across the nation open the narrative of 1776 to multiple voices, from our complex past to the continuing challenges of the present.

The meaning of Revolutionary Era ideals such as liberty and equality transcend 1776 as the American experiment continues to evolve. The 250th provides an opportunity to create a sense of belonging in the American story and elevate the voices of all to build an inclusive culture in which those voices are encouraged, respected, and supported. Enlarging the concept of history to encompass the past “from time immemorial” will help ensure the inclusion of many perspectives, including Native American and African American histories.

Local historical and heritage organizations have a responsibility to highlight the connections of their diverse communities to the themes of the 250th. These organizations should look for opportunities to collaborate and develop programming with local communities, schools, and educators.

3. Promote Historical Thinking and Civic Education in Classrooms

Fostering historical thinking helps students move from understanding history as a set of memorized facts about the past, to historical inquiry as a foundation for informed action in the present.

The greatest assurance for the long-term success of the American Revolution will occur in the classroom. Social studies, which includes history and civic education, must be valued and mandated at every level of education, from elementary school through college. The skills developed through critical thinking, reading, and writing in history classes are essential foundations of civic engagement and cultural literacy. Students learn to examine the country’s past in real, not imagined, terms and recognize that history is written from many viewpoints and perspectives. Students can apply what they discover through history to their work in other disciplines and to the challenges they will encounter in their own lives.

4. Elevate Teacher Training

Teachers must be trained to present history as a humanistic study that is relevant and vibrant. Teachers must move history instruction beyond dates and names detached from their contexts to share rich and complex stories that recognize a full range of voices and experiences. Teachers serve as guides, creating opportunities for their students to investigate the past and make their own discoveries. Using inquiry based programs like National History Day, teachers

empower students to follow their passions and research their interests, making history come alive through active learning.

Teachers must be equipped with the skills and the facts needed to teach difficult histories and to forthrightly address conflict and controversy both in the past and in historical understandings of the past. For example, teachers should be guided to resources like the Southern Poverty Law Center's curriculum for teaching American slavery, which uses historical evidence as a foundation for understanding slavery's place in the American story.

5. Strengthen Partnerships Among Museums, Historic Sites, and Schools

Central to their mission, museums and historic sites develop robust education programs. Yet these resources often go underutilized by schools. The 250th provides an opportunity to make the resources of museums and historic sites a vital component of social studies teaching in schools throughout the country.

Collaboration among museums, historic sites, and schools will help communities discover the history that surrounds them. Beneficial partnerships can highlight local connections to the 250th not only through place and time, but also through Revolutionary Era ideals such as freedom and equality.

6. Establish Foundations for Teaching and Learning the Revolutionary Era

Education efforts at schools and historical organizations across the country must rest on three broad pillars:

- I. Sharing a broader history of the Revolutionary Era by welcoming the full diversity of people living in the colonies and early Republic into the traditional narrative of the nation's founding, including Native Americans, African Americans, women, and non-elite colonists.
- II. Building local histories of 1776 through place-based explorations of the peoples and communities of the eighteenth century in the locations that would become part of the United States and its territories. Encourage a global perspective by placing the Thirteen Colonies in the context of the larger Atlantic world, and by exploring the intertwining histories of European colonialism in the Americas.
- III. Identifying connections between the founding era and the variety of 21st Century communities that exist today in each historical organization's town, city, state, and region. Local institutions must explore how the multifaceted history and ideals of 1776 can resonate with every community that they serve.

OUR MOONSHOT GOALS

Engage Students in Doing History

DRAFT: JULY 2020

Challenge historic and cultural institutions to create programming that engages local students in hands-on historical learning. Students can help develop community-based public history projects with local cultural institutions that will make a lasting contribution to the community's understanding of its past, and will inspire students to become history-makers in their own lifetimes.

Develop a national ***Discoveries in History Medal*** program to foster youth engagement in historical inquiry. Students might draw on existing programs, such as North Carolina Tar Heels Junior Historians, National History Day, and EduHam, or create their own inquiry-based projects.

Create a ***Revolutionary Ideals in Action*** program to encourage local community service and civic engagement. Issue young people this challenge: "What can *you* build today that will foster your own community's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness?"

Recognize student participants at a culminating event at each State Capitol with press and social media coverage.

Restore History Education

Set an ambitious target for dedicated instructional time in social studies education in the elementary and secondary grades in each state/territory.

Schools must strive to dedicate **45 minutes** of daily classroom time to history and civics instruction by 2026. AASLH will partner with national education advocacy groups to promote this effort.

Integrate Teacher Education

Use the 250th as a vehicle to forge teacher education programming that integrates collegiate training with public history and cultural institutions, nationwide.

Create a micro-credentialing program for teachers to earn a credential in historical specialization. AASLH should work with a university partner to offer a co-branded certificate in history education where members of our community serve as faculty. AASLH should develop the online coursework to complete the certification program.

250 by the 250th

In order for these goals to be met successfully, AASLH must lead a strong grassroots movement of museums, historic sites, communities, membership, and allied organizations to endorse this document and advocate for its outcomes. AASLH must strive to build broad recognition across the historical community that the opportunities presented by the 250th must not be squandered.

As it was with the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, we believe it will send a strong message of support to have 250 signatories affixed to our document for America's 250th birthday in 2026.

OUTCOMES, PRODUCTS, INITIATIVES

1. Develop inclusive, age-appropriate curriculum and primary source sets for teaching the American Revolution, designed for the full range of K-12 learners.
2. Develop and publicize histories written from Native American, African American, and non-elite perspectives.
3. Encourage place-based histories of 1776 for every part of what would become the United States. Develop *Teaching with Historic Places* curriculum and grant programs.
4. Ensure resources are accessible for ELA/ELL students:
 - a. Translate curriculum into Spanish and other key languages
 - b. Empower students to look for their own community in this story
5. Maximize connections with civic education.
6. Establish a centralized concierge for curriculum resources.
7. Task students with researching and writing the history of their school/their community.
 - a. Where can you find liberty in your community (or its absence)?
 - b. Was there a turning point in your community's history?
 - c. Identify examples of revolutionary thinking in your community.
 - d. Develop intergenerational learning guides.
 - e. Publish and share.
8. Create a model for community history programs to preserve local history (History Harvests).
 - a. Partner with local libraries/archives.
 - b. Oral history booths.
 - c. Develop a tool kit to help people preserve family artifacts and histories.
9. Prompt schools and colleges to recognize the 250th with themed commencement tassels and commemorative diplomas for students who graduate during 2026.
10. Birth certificates can also honor the 250th during 2026.

CONCLUSION

This historic commemoration will provide an opportunity to prioritize those basic tenets of history education and historical thinking that are the lifeblood of a republic. These proposals are designed to implement the changes necessary for success. Once begun, these efforts will require vigilance and commitment to see them through.

The American war is over; but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government, and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens for these forms of government after they are established and brought to perfection.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, 1783