

NATIONAL HISTORY DAY OP-ED
19 JUNE 2012

Last week 62 students from across the commonwealth competed in the National History Day (NHD) contest at the University of Maryland. NHD, a year-long program for students in grades 6-12 and administered on the state level by the Kentucky Historical Society, teaches students that history is not the rote memorization of names and dates but the practice of skills critical to the 21st century: critical thinking, developing creative solutions, collaborating with others in a team setting and communicating thoughts and ideas textually, verbally and visually. These skills, while fundamental to the discipline of history, are transferable to subjects across the curriculum and necessary in our modern economy. In fact, companies such as Apple, Intel, Verizon and Ford have all championed the development of these skills to address the growing deficit of problem-solving abilities among young workers.

Beyond skills, a recent national evaluation of NHD (available at www.nhd.org) found that participating students improve achievement in other academic subjects, outperforming their non-participating peers on state standardized testing in reading, math and science. These students proved to be better writers – writing with purpose and real voice – and demonstrating an ability to marshal evidence to support their point of view. NHD students also proved to be more adept than non-participating peers at critical thinking, showing a greater ability to evaluate information for bias and perspective, analyzing and synthesizing multiple sources of data, and interpreting information to develop original thoughts and opinions.

Finally, essential to NHD is the development of an appreciation for the past with a purpose. Students who participate in NHD develop an understanding about how the past influences the present. Our choices and actions have consequences shaped both by controlled and uncontrolled variables. The body of knowledge and evidence available in our history helps inform our current decisions in order to build a better future. Students who participate in NHD understand the value of history, not as a nostalgia, but as a tool to propel them forward.

This year Kentucky's students competed against 2,800 peers from all 50 states and four international schools throughout Asia and various U.S. territories. Lexington's Winburn Middle School has been a leader in the NHD program for many years, a role evidenced by the five medals awarded to students at this year's national contest. As teachers and parents whose children participated in NHD we have seen first-hand how they have grown intellectually and socially. These middle-schoolers not only know how to write historical papers and build exhibit boards; they also produce documentary films and construct their own websites. They collect and analyze data from a wide variety of sources and interview eyewitnesses to history. This program has made the practice of history exciting, competitive and engaging. These children may not become historians, or even study history in college, but they will continue to use and be enriched by the skills developed and shaped through their participation in NHD.

For more information about NHD in Kentucky, contact the Kentucky Historical Society (<http://history.ky.gov> or call 502-564-1792).

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