

Abstract

Everyday Americans, Exceptional Americans

Loudoun County, Virginia, is one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States. In the past ten years, Loudoun's population has increased 72%, compared with a national growth rate of 10%, and it increased 97% in the previous decade. Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) faces enormous pressure to keep up with this staggering growth by building new schools and hiring hundreds of new teachers each year. LCPS embraces the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of its rapidly growing student body, but achievement has been uneven across student subpopulations. LCPS must prepare its current and new teachers to address the needs of all students. In partnership with the Department of History and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, LCPS proposes to create *Everyday Americans, Exceptional Americans*, a five-year program designed to raise student achievement in American history classrooms at all levels by strengthening teacher content knowledge, expanding research skills, increasing resources, and improving teaching techniques.

LCPS teachers face the challenge of students who struggle with history due to a lack of basic skills for reading, writing, and critical thinking. Many teachers also struggle to make American history interesting, relevant, and engaging to all groups of students. The LCPS Teaching American History program offers teachers a way to embrace the invigorating and intriguing complexities of the past by studying the words and actions of citizens who helped shape our nation. Delving into reading, research, and a wealth of materials, such as primary sources, biographies, and autobiographies, teachers will develop a more complex understanding of the past that they will use to engage their students with the stories of all Americans, exploring how individuals and groups have shaped the values and freedoms that define us as a nation.

Everyday Americans, Exceptional Americans centers on intensive, ongoing professional development for one hundred and fifty teachers over five years, with ten additional workshops open to all LCPS teachers. The program targets fourth, sixth, seventh, and eleventh-grade American history teachers, as well as teachers of English as Second Language (ESL) and special education students. These teachers have the greatest need and the weakest preparation in traditional American history content. To target this diverse audience, the program offers workshops on a wide array of content topics and time periods. Each year of the program focuses on a different theme, with two connected strands; one pre-1865 topic, one post-1865. Over the five years of the grant, all major historical periods are addressed: *Colonization, The Revolution and the New Nation, Expansion and Reform, Crisis and the Union: Civil War and Reconstruction, The Development of Modern America, Modern America and the World Wars, and Contemporary America*.

A cohort of thirty teachers each year participates in a content-rich two- to three-week summer institute, designed to unite teachers with prominent scholars and improve teachers' U.S. history content knowledge. The institutes also focus on the nature of historical thinking, online resources, and the use of primary sources, biography, autobiography, and other historical narratives to increase student interest and comprehension. During the year, teachers attend five additional workshops that focus on the content theme, and provide support and feedback as teachers develop and implement primary source activities that draw on their new knowledge and skills. Teachers also participate in ongoing classroom observations and online discussions with cohort teachers, historians, and project staff. This professional development model supports teachers in bridging the gap between workshops and classroom practice, and will result in meaningful improvement for history students across LCPS.