

# *Transforming Young Minds with the Magic of History:* National History Day Program Proves Innovative History Education Works

BY KIM FORTNEY AND CATHY GORN



National History Day

## *From Humble Beginnings to National Reach*

In April of 1974, 129 students from middle and high schools in the greater Cleveland area gathered on the campus of Case Western Reserve University to compete in a contest called History Day. The idea was the brainchild of David Van Tassel, a professor of history at CWRU, who was concerned about what he and colleagues believed to be a devalued emphasis on the humanities in general and history in particular in the nation's schools. Van Tassel was especially disturbed by the rote style of learning used in most history classrooms and wanted to do something to reinvigorate the teaching and learning of history.

He wanted to use a contest format to motivate students to study the past—not by memorizing names and dates, but by engaging in the art of historical inquiry. Uninterested in the spelling bee version of competition in which students memorize information and respond to questions, Van Tassel

looked to the science fair model in which students ask questions, conduct research, and analyze information to draw conclusions. Based on that model, Van Tassel and his colleagues developed a competition and hosted a day on campus when students would gather for evaluation and awards. He called it History Day, and thus was born a program that would spread nationwide. The name stuck, but the day turned into a year-long educational experience.

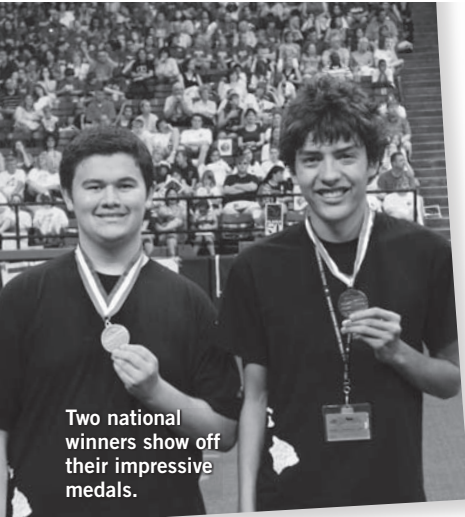
From its humble beginnings more than thirty-six years ago, National History Day (NHD) has expanded into a curriculum program and competition with a community-based approach that includes students, teachers, parents, historical societies, and museums. It is the only program of its kind that involves middle and high school students in an immersive, innovative learning program about U.S. and global history—and the only one that works with state and federal education standards set for history and language arts.

Teachers incorporate the NHD curriculum into their classrooms or offer the program as an extracurricular activity. Annually, more than 600,000 middle and high school students participate in NHD by creating presentations that bring primary source research to life through tabletop exhibits, documentaries, live performances, websites, and research papers. Participating students and teachers represent all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Guam, American Samoa, and Department of Defense and International Schools abroad. The program is supported locally with Affiliate Coordinators at the state level who represent local historical societies and museums, thus

*Above: Performances, one of the five NHD entry categories, enable students to incorporate props and costumes to present their research conclusions. Left: A group performance at the 2010 national contest.*



National History Day



Two national winners show off their impressive medals.

National History Day

representing a true partnership between historians and historical societies, educators, and students. Students work together with teachers and local historical societies and museums on year-long history projects, culminating in local and state contests—and a final national competition, the Kenneth E. Behring National History Day Contest, held each June in College Park, Maryland.

### *National History Day* **WORKS: Evaluation Study Key Findings<sup>1</sup>**

As NHD has grown, so have the numbers of testimonials from students, teachers, and parents, crediting the program with helping students develop vital research, critical thinking, and communication skills. Anecdotal praise and gratitude come not just from school-age participants, but also from NHD alumni who have gone on to careers in history (museums, archives, academia) and K-12 education, as well as media, marketing, law, medicine, and other fields for which they report the skills and knowledge acquired through NHD have served them well.

Despite the anecdotal success stories, NHD was missing independently gathered empirical data—the hard, evidentiary proof about program effectiveness that school administrators need to select course offerings and allot staff and funds. At the same time, the need to demonstrate the wide-ranging effectiveness of innovative, successful modes of teaching history is at a critical point. According to the most recent federal study of American students' academic ability in history, the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the nation's report card, approximately half—47 percent—of U.S. twelfth graders are performing at a basic level in history. And a little more than one in ten high school seniors—13 percent—perform at a proficient level in the subject matter.<sup>2</sup>

To learn more about National History Day and review the evaluation research report, visit [www.nhd.org](http://www.nhd.org). Follow the program on Facebook ([www.Facebook.com/NationalHistoryDay](http://www.Facebook.com/NationalHistoryDay)) and Twitter (@NationalHistory).

Against this backdrop, National History Day identified the need for an evaluation to prove its effectiveness and validate what its leaders have known anecdotally for years—the NHD

experience transforms young people into scholars, and historical societies and museum professionals play an integral role in the future of history education. With funding from Kenneth E. Behring and the U.S. Department of Education, NHD commissioned independent research organization Rockman et al. to develop and implement a research plan to explore the impact of the program.<sup>3</sup>

Rockman designed a study to examine student performance on state standardized assessments, looking not just at social studies but also at other academic subjects for which skills might transfer. The study also included performance

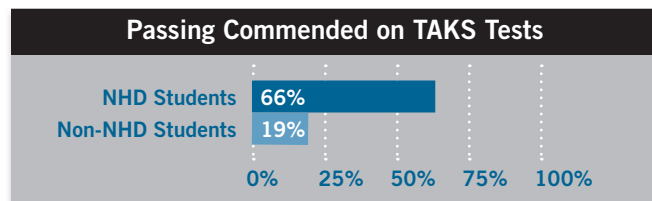
assessments, whether students could apply the research, writing, and critical thinking skills developed through NHD participation (skills that track closely with the twenty-first-century skills identified by educators and business leaders as the skills students need to enter college and the workplace fully prepared).

To conduct the research, Rockman recruited study sites from around the country. Criteria included geographic representation, diversity in the student population and inclusion of underrepresented minorities, and sufficient history with NHD to allow researchers to look at student performance over time. The four final sites included: Aldine Unified School District (Houston, Texas), Paterson School District (Paterson, New Jersey), Chesterfield County Schools (Cheraw and Chesterfield, South Carolina), and a large urban/suburban district in Colorado.<sup>4</sup>

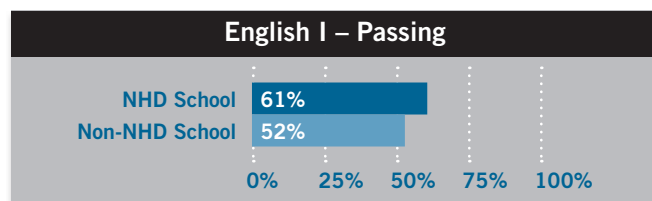
Researchers gathered and examined student success across a range of measures: performance assessments, surveys and standardized test scores, academic performance, and interest in past and current events. They compared students who participated in National History Day to those who did not participate in the program. The racial/ethnic representation of students in the study closely mirrored the breakdown in the U.S., with a slightly higher percentage of black and Hispanic students included in the study. Across the range of assessments, the study found that scores or ratings for students who participated in NHD were higher than their peers who did not participate in the program.

The evaluation study's notable findings include:

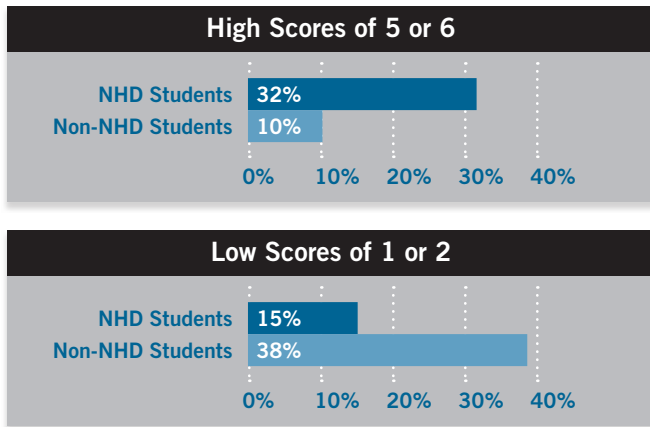
**1. NHD students outperform their non-NHD peers on standardized tests in all topic areas, including reading, science, and math, as well as social studies.** For example, in Texas, NHD students outperformed their non-NHD peers on Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. During four years of performance, NHD students scored more than twice as well on TAKS as non-NHD students. Nearly two thirds of NHD students met the minimum, had commended performance, or passed TAKS the first time, compared to 19 percent of non-NHD students.



**2. NHD students in South Carolina outperformed their non-NHD peers on English assessments.** In South Carolina, NHD high school students led their school district with a 61 percent passing rate in English 1—9 percent above a comparison site.



**3. NHD students are better writers—they write with a purpose and real voice, and they marshal solid evidence to support their points of view. NHD students had more exemplary writing scores and fewer low scores than comparison students.** Overall, NHD students outscored comparison-group students on both pre- and post-writing assessments, receiving more exemplary scores (fives or sixes) on a six-point scale.

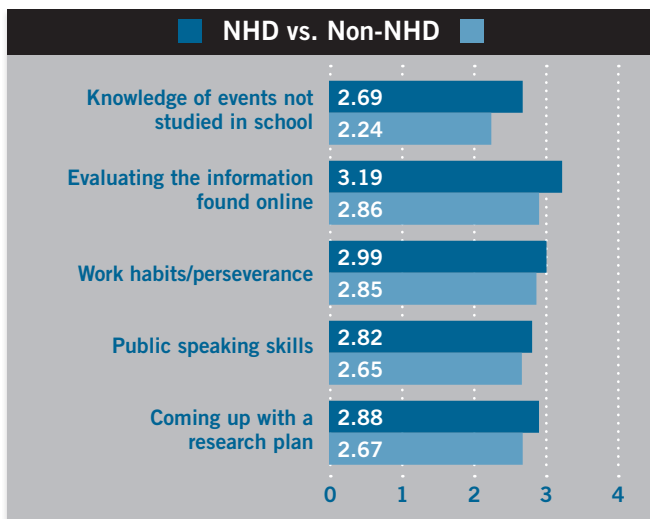


**4. NHD has a positive impact among students whose interests in academic subjects may wane in high school.**

- Among black and Latino students, NHD students outperformed non-NHD students, posting higher performance assessment scores and levels of interest and skills.
- Compared to non-NHD boys and to all girls, boys participating in NHD reported significantly higher levels of interest in history, civic engagement, and confidence in research skills on both pre- and post-surveys.

**5. NHD students learn twenty-first-century college- and career-ready skills. They learn to collaborate with team members, talk to experts, manage their time, and persevere.**

When asked about their confidence in a variety of career- and college-ready skills, NHD students have an edge over their peers. NHD students consistently express more confidence than students who do not participate in NHD, including research skills, public speaking, the ability to organize a report, knowledge of current events, work habits, evaluating sources, and writing skills (reported on a four-point scale).



**6. NHD students are critical thinkers who can digest, analyze, and synthesize information.** Performance assessments show that NHD students were 18 percent better overall than their peers at interpreting historical information (an average of 79 percent correct vs. 61 percent correct).

### *The Impact of the National History Day Evaluation on History Education*

Through National History Day, students have the opportunity to see history as something other than completely concluded events of the past. Participants instead realize that history is fluid, that all events exist in context and are affected by time, place, and circumstances that occur before, during, and after the historical event itself. And most importantly, they realize that history has an impact on the present. Consider the case of Captain McVay of the ill-fated WWII naval ship, the *USS Indianapolis*, whose court martial was overturned as a result of the research conducted by former NHD student, Hunter Scott, who is now a Navy helicopter pilot. Yet another is the discovery by four students in Kansas of the forgotten story of Irena Sendler, a Holocaust heroine who saved the lives of 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto. Their efforts have led to countless presentations of their research nationwide, several visits with Sendler in Poland, and the establishment of a trust fund that cared for her until her death in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

Learning the facts about a topic is just the first step in a layered process of historical research that takes students from broad secondary sources to eye-opening primary sources. As they progress to more sophisticated levels of historical research, they analyze the sources, consider the context, and draw conclusions that may concur or disagree with existing secondary scholarship on the topic. These conclusions from past events have lasting impact, as a student who participated in the research study articulated, “I believe that knowing where you came from and where you’re going is essential to succeed in society. By knowing what has happened in the past, and analyzing what is presently occurring, we can change what will happen.” Without the expertise and collaboration of local museums and history organizations, National History Day would not be able to provide such a rich foundation of historical research methods and analysis instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does the research validate NHD’s innovative approach to history education, but it is significant for the history field in terms of supporting the value of project-based learning in history. Research into effective education in other disciplines exists, but a study of history education’s effect on research skills, critical thinking skills, perspective, and interest in current events is unprecedented.

After reviewing the findings, Beverly Sheppard, president and CEO of the Institute for Learning Innovation, called it a groundbreaking study. In Sheppard’s view, “History Day validates the intelligence and desire of students to be self-driven and investigative in their thinking. Participation underscores a core belief that learning is far more than acquiring facts. It is about how students find, analyze, and apply information to support and justify their own conclusions.”<sup>7</sup>



*Left to Right:* Nathan Huegen, NHD Affiliate Coordinator at National WWII Museum; Kyle McKoy, Director of Education, Arizona Historical Society; Ann Toplovich, Executive Director, Tennessee Historical Society; Burt Logan, Executive Director, Ohio Historical Society; and Janet Gallimore, Executive Director, Idaho State Historical Society all testify to NHD's importance.

Credits: Nathan Huegen, Kyle McKoy, Ann Toplovich, Burt Logan, Janet Gallimore

## *Conversations with History Professionals about National History Day's Evaluation*

History educators have long known (anecdotally and through observation of students) that the informal education occurring in the museum, historical society, or historic house complements and enhances the formal education taking place in the classroom. And museum and historical association professionals who are also state or regional coordinators of NHD know that it works as an integrated component of formal school curricula. They see the impact on students and teachers in the form of greater interest in history, more probing questions about historical topics, and a robust quest for primary source documents and artifacts to help reveal the complexities of a research topic. The evaluation findings provide a stronger bridge to link these two worlds, particularly as NHD students utilize the collections and archival holdings of museums, historical societies, and historic houses and seek explanations from museum professionals at these institutions.

Because many history professionals are former NHD participants themselves, they often pull directly from their experience when helping current participants. As public historians, they are vital to the continued success of the program, providing critical assistance through judging, research support, student mentoring, and hosting contests. They are often spokespeople for the program, meeting with school superintendents and educators to encourage participation in NHD. They tout the benefits of NHD participation and they see the power of this new evaluation data for reaching out, not only to school administrators and teachers, but also to potential donors, legislators, and community leaders. Conversations with notable museum and historical association professionals reveal compelling ways to utilize the evaluation findings in building support for NHD's innovative educational approach. Following are a few examples.

Nathan Huegen, a former teacher, is student resource librarian and NHD Affiliate Coordinator at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. In the past year, he has overseen a four-fold increase in student participation in the state's NHD program while also expanding the program into museums and universities throughout Louisiana. With the NHD evaluation findings, he plans to present NHD as "project-based learning that is an effective way to teach history." Huegen understands that "teachers don't need the data as critically as their principals because the program stands on its own. But the findings provide a very powerful justification to principals of why they want to do NHD." In presenting these findings to administrators, he expects a "gotcha" moment to come when he demonstrates that NHD participation leads to higher scores on standardized tests. To pique the interest of school administrators, he

intends to use press releases, coordinated with emails and mailed letters, that focus on the evaluation and the WWII Museum's partnership with NHD. To reach new teachers in workshops and other communication, he will incorporate the evaluation findings as "assurance that NHD is a proven academic program."<sup>8</sup>

Kyle McKoy, Director of Education at the Arizona Historical Society—and Arizona's NHD affiliate co-coordinator—travels frequently throughout the state to promote the society's educational programs, including NHD, to teachers and students. She understands "the data will help teachers convince administrators that this is a worthy program that transfers skills to other subjects and areas of life." McKoy sees this data as a means to convince trustees and others who might think the best measure of a program's effectiveness is attendance, that the quality of learning is much more significant and has greater impact. To reach new teachers, he will incorporate the evaluation findings as "assurance that NHD is a proven academic program."<sup>9</sup>

Ann Toplovich, Executive Director of the Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee's NHD sponsoring institution, believes that the study results "demonstrate that NHD benefits not only the student, but, by extension, the community in which the student lives. Within the current political climate, civic engagement is more important than ever to many elected officials. NHD brings very positive attention to historical societies/museums." She also sees the finding related to interest in history and why it's important as being beneficial to the history education field at large: "NHD can help develop audiences and supporters for history museums and associated programs for the future." Toplovich intends to use the findings in communications with members of the historical society and with sponsors of the state program, highlighting the study's data on improved test scores and the skills and traits needed for an informed citizenry.<sup>10</sup>

Burt Logan, Executive Director of the Ohio Historical Society, which sponsors NHD in Ohio, sees his constituency as public: public funding providers, state educational authorities, school districts, and teachers; organizational: members, local historical societies; and individual: parents, guardians, mentors of NHD students, the students themselves, and "the amorphous public body that opines that today's youth are not interested in history, and as a result are 'history illiterate.'" Logan believes the findings are relevant to each of these audiences and plans to incorporate the findings as part of ongoing fundraising and recruitment for NHD. And further, "the findings confirm that many of today's students are 'turned on' by history and their study and analysis of history are preparing them to be responsible citizens and leaders."<sup>11</sup>

Janet Gallimore is Executive Director of the Idaho State Historical Society (ISHS), a system of cultural resources

comprising the state historical museum, state archives, state historic preservation office, and statewide historic sites program. The ISHS initially intends to use the National History Day study findings in three ways: to partner with the state's *Go On* campaign seeking to encourage students to attend college; to promote NHD as a program that can assist teachers in meeting their curriculum mandates through enhanced lesson planning; and as part of the ISHS's budget presentation to the legislature during the 2012 session. Gallimore plans to create an NHD Idaho case study Frequently Asked Questions document in partnership with relevant state agencies to promote the program as a better way for busy teachers to meet their own school and district goals through enhanced lessons and required senior projects. According to Janet, "One ISHS outcome is teaching essential history literacy and promoting learning and a historical/research process throughout public programs. If we accomplish this while addressing a significant state education need, then we have truly met our mission and contributed to the long-term enhancement of our state and its citizens."<sup>12</sup>

The value of history education is long-lasting and wide-ranging. Students find that studying the past gives them an understanding of democracy and citizenship unlike any other subject or class in school. It challenges them to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their communities. And now, as the NHD evaluation shows, it equips them with tools for college and career success. Through National History Day's ongoing collaboration with local and state

museums and historical societies, it will continue to challenge students well into the future. ●

**Cathy Gorn, Ph.D.**, is executive director of National History Day. She spearheaded the formal evaluation and is overseeing the release of the findings throughout the history field and to the general public. Cathy has been with NHD since 1982 and has guided its expansion and reach to include 600,000 student and 20,000 teacher participants. **Kim Fortney, M.A.**, is deputy director of National History Day. Kim works directly with NHD's fifty-five affiliates and oversees the national contest. She joined NHD in 2009 after fourteen years in the museum field and nineteen years as a member of the extended NHD family.

<sup>1</sup> Details and writing about National History Day's evaluation study were supplied by Kay Sloan of Rockman et al. For the full evaluation study report, please visit [www.nhd.org](http://www.nhd.org).

<sup>2</sup> Jihyun Lee and Andrew R. Weiss. *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2006*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.

<sup>3</sup> Additional research promotion funding was provided by an anonymous challenge grant, HISTORY, the David and Janice Larson Foundation, H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, Albert H. Small, Southwest Airlines and National History Day Board of Trustees, Staff, Judges & Affiliate Coordinators.

<sup>4</sup> The Colorado school district requested that study reports not identify it by name.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.unc.edu/~hascott/hunter](http://www.unc.edu/~hascott/hunter) for more information on Hunter Scott's research on this topic. See [www.irenasendler.org](http://www.irenasendler.org) for information on the Irena Sendler Project.

<sup>6</sup> *National History Day Evaluation, Key Findings*, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Beverly Sheppard, interview by Kim Fortney, 16 November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Huegen, interview by Kim Fortney, 10 November 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Kyle McKoy, Interview by Kim Fortney, 16 November 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Toplovich, Interview by Kim Fortney, 10 November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Burt Logan, Interview by Kim Fortney, 16 November 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Gallimore, Interview by Kim Fortney, 16 November 2010.

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