

PURSuing TRUTH DEFENDING LIBERTY

The Hillsdale
1776
Curriculum

An Introduction



HILLSDALE COLLEGE

The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum

k12.hillsdale.edu



Dr. Larry P. Arnn | President, Hillsdale College

Welcome

The first question is, why study civics? As the classical authors teach us, living under laws is natural for human beings. After all, we can think in different ways than other creatures, and we can talk. Whatever we can think, we can say. That makes a natural closeness among us, and the political community is an expression of that closeness. For that reason alone, civics is one of those subjects that the educated person must know.

The second reason is that politics is important. Great harm is done by bad laws, and great good by good laws. We are citizens. We have an obligation to our fellow citizens and an interest for ourselves to make the laws as good as they can be.

The third reason is that the United States of America, our country, is a remarkable place. In 2026, we will reach the 250th anniversary of the founding of our nation. By any reckoning, this is a significant milestone. Our nation has grown from a few people huddled in a strange land along the eastern seaboard to a huge nation that spans the continent. Through the vast changes that have come upon the world and the United States in these centuries, the nation has been governed under a written Constitution, long the oldest surviving in human history. Under the principles of the Declaration of Independence, that Constitution provides for a government operating under the authority of the governed. This achievement is unprecedented.

The nation suffers deep divisions, divisions especially about the meaning and the goodness of that founding. Because that founding begins in the Declaration of Independence, which states that human equality is grounded in the nature of things, in the “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” a controversy about the founding is a controversy about our understanding of ourselves and nature and therefore of everything. This is a serious matter.

It is a happy thing that this controversy has so much to do with history. History is complete and cannot be changed. To the extent one can find out about it, he is finding a truth that will abide. Also, controversies about history, like controversies about everything, can only be resolved by looking at the facts. The historical facts are available for us to see.

The facts of the American Revolution are in some ways complex, although we assert that they are wonderful. Also, they are simple. The United States begins on a certain day, July 4, 1776, with a statement of the meaning of the nation and its purposes. One begins with that. And he proceeds in the same way, by studying the record of the American Revolution and later American history in order to see what it is.

This curriculum is a work of education. Education is important to each citizen and to the nation as a whole. The seeds from which a nation’s future grows are planted and nourished in the education and formation of its citizens. Our nation’s founders knew this and articulated it in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which states: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall ever be encouraged.” The ordinance is unequivocal that without appropriate education the government cannot be good and the people cannot be happy. These two are intertwined with one another and stand upon a foundation of good education.

This curriculum is the work of teachers rather than officials or bureaucrats; it is informed by experience in the classroom as well as long and loving study of the history and principles of our country; and it seeks to cultivate in students the knowledge and virtue necessary to live good lives as citizens. It is an expression of the work of Hillsdale College since its founding in 1844, located in the very Northwest Territory established by the Northwest Ordinance. For the last 177 years, through civil war, depression, pandemic, and world war, Hillsdale College has remained committed to its founding principles. Admitting from its inception all students “irrespective of nation, race, and sex,” Hillsdale has studied and taught, and also fought, for the blessings of liberty championed in the American founding. This curriculum is an invitation to students, parents, and schools to join us in the work upon which the nation itself depends: to educate a people for liberty.

Dr. Larry P. Arnn



President, Hillsdale College



Hillsdale Academy

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Hillsdale College and K-12 Education

Located in rural southern Michigan, Hillsdale College was founded in 1844 with the purpose of providing its students “sound learning” of the kind necessary to preserve the “blessings of civil and religious liberty.” In the words of its modern mission statement, it “considers itself a trustee of our Western philosophical and theological inheritance tracing to Athens and Jerusalem, a heritage finding its clearest expression in the American experiment of self-government under law.”

Outreach efforts of the College include the Barney Charter School Initiative; the Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.; the Center for Constructive Alternatives, one of the largest college lecture series in America; the Ludwig von Mises Lectures in free market economics; the Hoogland Center for Teacher Excellence; National Leadership Seminars in major cities nationwide; and *Imprimis*, a monthly speech digest with a circulation over 6.2 million.

The College’s educational mission rests upon two principles: academic excellence and institutional independence. The College is nationally known for its large and rigorous core curriculum, including a one-semester course on the U.S. Constitution, and for its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies for any of its operations.

Hillsdale College K-12 Education

Hillsdale College has, since 1844, offered to its students an education in the liberal arts and sciences. But the College’s founders laid down a second purpose, one to which a liberal education naturally lends itself. They recognized that “civil and



Hillsdale College Campus, Hillsdale, Michigan

religious liberty” depended on “the diffusion of sound learning.” The College is committed to educating the country’s young people to be good, thoughtful human beings and responsible American citizens.

Hillsdale College K-12 Education brings the College’s founding mission to any K-12 American student. The College shares with students and teachers an education modeled on Hillsdale’s undergraduate course of study adapted appropriately for K-12 students. Hillsdale College K-12 Education promotes the founding of Hillsdale Classical Schools, and excellence in their teaching and operations, so that American students may be educated in the liberal arts and sciences and receive instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue.

The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum

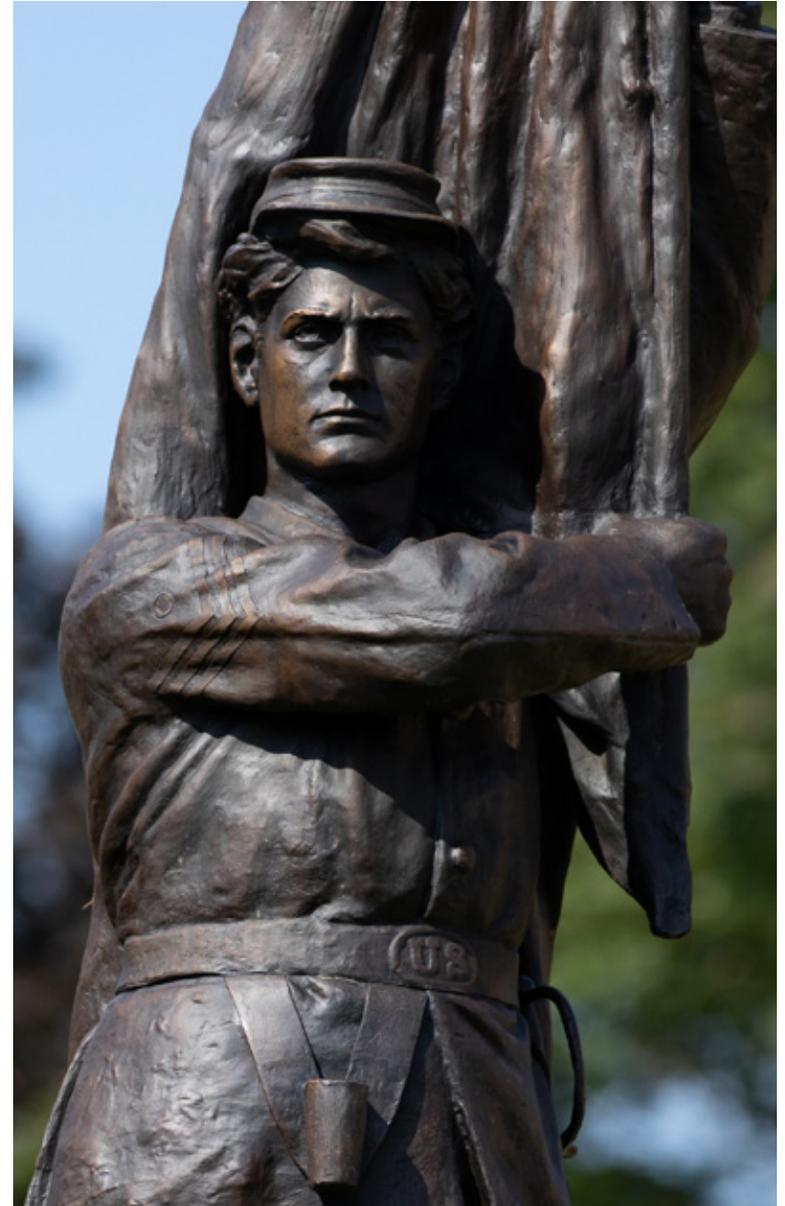
The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum is a complete collection of lesson plans for teaching American history, civics, and government to K-12 students. Students who study using this curriculum learn about American history from the colonies through the Civil War at four different times during their K-12 years, each time increasing in depth. The curriculum also includes American history since the Civil War and American government and civics for both middle and high school students.

The curriculum is drawn from the actual evidence of the past, mostly documentary, which is our sole way of knowing what has gone before. It stays as close to that evidence as possible. As the student grows and learns, he is increasingly placed in direct contact with this evidence.

The curriculum provides teachers with guidance—not dictates—about how to plan and teach a given topic in American history or civics. This guidance includes Hillsdale College-vetted books, online courses, and other resource recommendations; lists of content topics, stories to tell, and questions to ask of students; “Keys to the Lesson” that clarify important points for teachers to keep in mind; student-ready primary sources; and sample assignments, activities, and assessments.

The introduction outlines how content was chosen, the pedagogical principles appropriate for teaching the curriculum, how teachers might use the curriculum when they plan lessons, what is necessary for the successful adoption of the curriculum and the restoration of American K-12 education, and the principles underlying the curriculum’s approach to history and civics education.

The curriculum is the product of Hillsdale College professors and some of the very best K-12 teachers, both past and present, derived from and created for real classrooms with real students taught by real teachers.



Civil War Monument by Lorado Taft, Hillsdale College



Constitution of the United States in its encasement in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom | Source: National Archives Museum

Engaging an Inheritance

In history and civics classes, American students should have one aim above all: to understand what they have received, i.e., their inheritance as Americans. To understand clearly, students and teacher alike must adopt a stance of humility. And this humility is fostered by the recognition on the part of the student that the world in which we live, with all its benefits and also its faults, is not of our own creation. This is the beginning of American history and civic education.

From this starting point, the field of discovery in history and civics is, if not endless, then impossible to explore completely in any number of lifetimes. Principles must therefore be discerned and applied to determine where to begin, on what to focus, and in which order. The need to choose and choose carefully is all the more pressing within the limits of thirteen years of formal education.

This curriculum rejects many fashionable ways to make decisions about what students should learn. Such trends include basing what students learn on political ideology and activism; corporate interests for preferred kinds of consumers and workers; the interests of higher education, standardized testing, and textbook corporations; and the color of one's skin. As to this final criterion, to base the content of a civics curriculum on such a standard is to resurrect and reinforce in students that they ought to judge, value, and treat people differently based on traits that a person does not control instead of on what he or she believes, says, or does. To teach students to so discriminate undermines the inherent dignity of each person and the equality found in each person's equal possession of natural rights.

In defense of both the student and the historical figures she studies, this curriculum rejects all of these demands for deciding what students should encounter.

Instead, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* determines what students should learn in history and civics based on the answers to a single question: What ideas, words, and deeds have most significantly formed the world into which students were born? Studying the answers to this question provides students the fullest understanding of the world in which they will live their lives.

Of course, this question is not easy to answer. But this curriculum insists and does its utmost to abide by an honest commitment to the truth as it is, not as what some might want it to be. Rather than predetermining what we hope to find—and cherry-picking, obscuring, or even fabricating “facts” to fit our preconceived notions—this curriculum begins with searching for what actually happened and the contemporaneously stated reasons for why it happened.

So, what has most significantly shaped the world into which students were born? From where has their inheritance come?

First, the past. Much of what has immediately affected the student has happened since her birth: family, upbringing, and sometimes local current events. But students are already familiar with these influences, and it is not the place of the school to belittle the student by assuming her only interests or capacities for learning depend on what she already lives with on a daily basis. Nor is it the place of the school to draft the student into the civic work or outright political activism of adults. The world of the student was formed before she was born, and it is in history that she may search for understanding of his world.

Second, that which is most proximate. As a child’s life is shaped first by her parents, her home, her relatives, and her neighborhood, so has the student’s broader world been shaped most by figures within her own country’s past. This curriculum therefore brings students into encounters with American history and American civics, with due regard for the influences of figures from the world and particularly from the cradles of Western

Civilization in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe—figures who informed the very first Americans.

Third, individual persons. Ideas, words, and actions do not exist in a vacuum. They do not have a mind of their own. And history is not some fatalistic force compelling people to act a certain way, as Karl Marx claimed. The past, and therefore the present world of the student, is the creation of certain individual Americans who have had an outsized impact on the world the student has inherited. Moreover, these individual people are just like the student. They may look different or have come from a different background and have lived in a different time and place, but their desire to find what they thought was good in order to be happy, their high ideals, and their fallibility were all the same as those of the student. For all people at all times share the same human nature. This curriculum thus asks students to exercise the same imaginations that allow them to sympathize with talking animals and mythical demigods. These imaginations bring students into encounters with certain past American figures—not only on the basis of the extraordinary impact that these individuals have had on the student’s present world but also because in learning about them, students learn about themselves.

The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum determines what students encounter based on what has shaped their world the most. As a result, students will have presented before their minds the following content, which may rightly be regarded as their birthright, their inheritance.

Persons

Because history and civics are composed of the actual thoughts, words, and actions of unique individuals, the study of individuals is of paramount importance in the curriculum. The curriculum is a person-driven encounter for students. Biographies lie at



George Washington statue at Federal Hall in New York City | Source iStockphoto.com

the heart of the content, and students focus on individuals and individual actions rather than studying merely groups of people or social factors. Students study any given individual insofar as knowledge of him or her reveals the nature of human beings, helps students to understand circumstances that are foreign to them, or explains the cause of historical events and changes that were of extraordinary impact in forming the students' world.

Primary Sources

What makes human beings human, distinct from animals, is our capacity for reason: to have thoughts and formulate ideas, and then to share those ideas through speech, both oral and written. The principal content of the curriculum, therefore, is primary sources, curated for the appropriate grade level. Primary sources capture the inner workings of past Americans, revealing

their thoughts and desires, their virtues and vices. Although supplemental discoveries by historians and research are necessary and helpful, they often involve more conjecture than is warranted. It is the primary sources that are our chief evidence about the past and the origins of the student's world. Within history and civics, documents, speeches, private correspondence, firsthand accounts, and the like reveal to students the interplay between human thoughts and events and lend insights into the ideas on which America was founded.

Geography and Places

Students learn about space. Each student has a physical existence. She occupies a certain part of physical space that no other person occupies. Students need to learn how to make sense of their places in the physical world. In American history, students must see how the fact that we are embodied beings living in a particular physical space has formed the thoughts and actions of historical figures and themselves.



Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia by Charles Marion Russell | Public Domain

Events and Dates

Knowledge of time includes gaining a general sense of temporal existence and of where their own lives and ages fit relative to the lives of those who have come before them. It also includes learning by heart certain dates of events or spans of time. Learning dates by heart should not be drudgery, but purposefully employed as guideposts for students in piecing together the chronological relationship between historical causes and their effects.

Terms and Topics

Typical curricula often require students to know the definitions of things. To reduce learning to the mere memorization of definitions and facts saps the wonder from history and civics and allows for easy manipulation of students. Instead, teachers should think in terms of topics—themes, events, and ideas ranging from the abstract to the particular; they should contemplate the full diversity of realities that had arisen in the lives of figures living and thinking and acting in a certain time and place. This curriculum does not reduce history and civics to memorizing definitions but instead drives students to engage terms and topics—and to question them. Above all, students seek to understand these terms and topics, their relations to the figures who also engaged with them in their own times, and to ask what they mean and what they show us about human beings and their country.

To Know by Heart

America’s founding and history is one of the best documented in the history of humankind. American students have before them an array of the truest of statements posited in beautiful words that have informed and inspired Americans for more than two centuries. In light of this unique opportunity, the curriculum

nourishes the privileged capacity of childhood: the ready ability to learn and know things by heart. Students bring from this curriculum not only knowledge and skills, but also words and poetry and songs to carry in their hearts for the rest of their lives.

Stories for the American Heart

The word history means story, and in studying history, students learn from a thoughtful retelling of what happened. American history is full of more than four centuries of stories, some of which are the stuff of illustrative legend, while others are documented in detail. These stories—of individual Americans, events, heroic exploits, tragic turns of events, letters, firsthand accounts, etc.—captivate the attention of the student, draw him into the historical scene, bring people of the past alive, and paint within the student’s moral imagination vivid images and examples of human conduct. Cumulatively, students gain a kind of seeing that can guide their understanding of history and their own conduct as human beings and American citizens.



“Lunch Atop a Skyscraper” | Public Domain

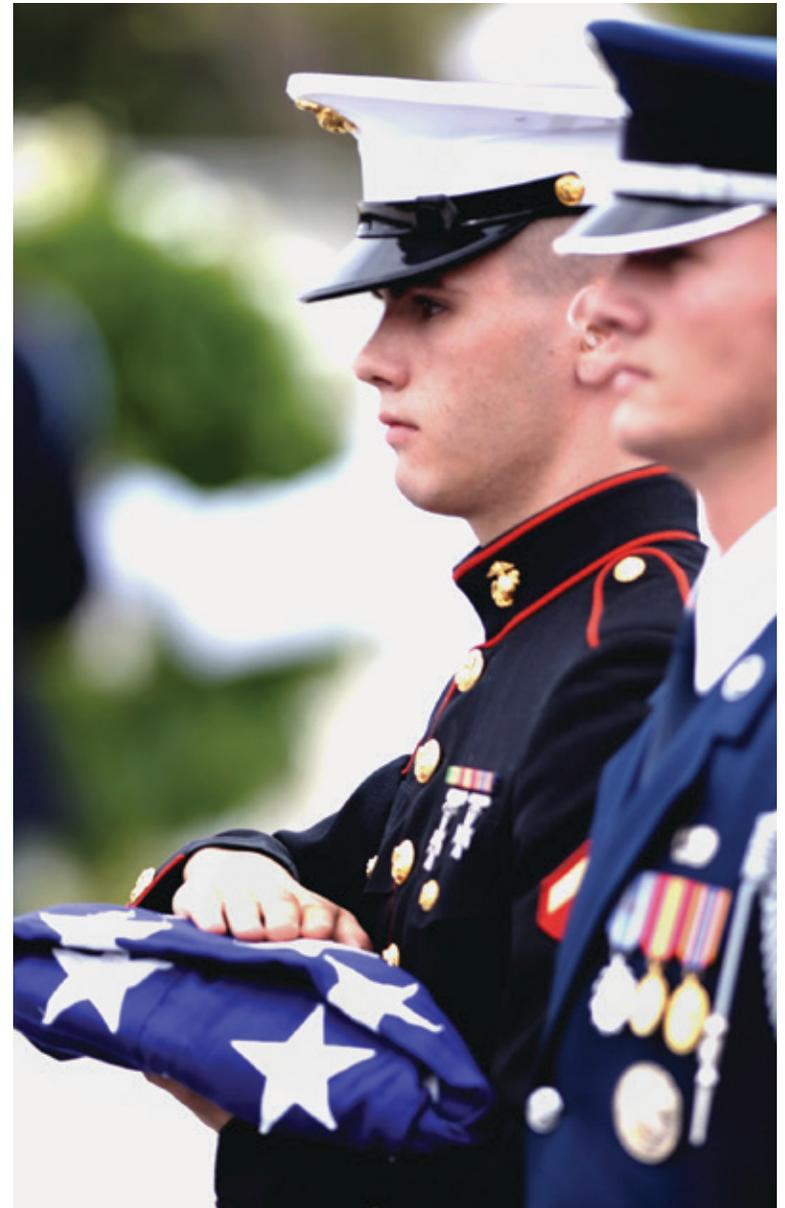
Questions for the American Mind

Beyond initial sensory perception and physical experience, a student’s understanding deepens when the mind grapples with reality, brings what is known to bear on what is new and unknown, and attempts to see how they fit together and how they do not. The chief means for fitting the intellect of the student to the reality of the world—to the truth—is through questions that challenge the student to reorient and apply herself to reality. But not all questions are the same. The first questions are matters of simple facts: the who, the what, the when, the where. These give the student knowledge. But true learning, real education, seeks something deeper, more full and complete and meaningful. To achieve understanding and practice in the virtue of wisdom, students must be asked the all-important question that has motivated all inquiry through all time: Why? This curriculum offers teachers a collection of possible questions that put the mind into action, pushing students into the more fertile territory of why something is the case and how they know something to be true. The asking of and grappling with thousands of such question for the student through this curriculum engenders in her a more complete understanding of her country and of herself.

Images

Like the stained-glass windows of great medieval buildings, images tell a story. With today’s technology, the student can encounter magnificent works of art, facsimiles, maps, and photographs daily in class. Each image may reinforce a historical figure or episode or become a jumping-off point for an entire lesson. Innumerable observations may be made and questions asked of the image, driving the class with the natural inquiry the student possesses, and providing a vivid lens into America through the decades.

This is what students who are taught this curriculum encounter. This is their inheritance.



Pentagon Memorial dedication ceremony, September 11, 2008 | Source: Wikimedia Commons



Atlanta Classical Academy

Sharing a Love

What does a guest see upon entering a history and civics classroom?

The guest first notices walls alive with the past, with facsimiles, maps, portraits and paintings from American history. He sees the students with a pencil and paper and perhaps the text of a document or historical account upon their desks. And he sees their gaze moving from their desktops to a projected image or map, and finally and most consistently, to the teacher herself.

In a word, our guest sees harmony. It will look different based on grade level and school, on teacher and students. But sound history and civics classrooms will embrace an ordering and arranging of parts, just as the members of a symphony orchestra or athletic team move in complement to one another toward a common end, led by a director or captain or coach.

And what does our guest hear? He hears the teacher speaking, telling a story and asking questions about it.

First, with variations in voice and tone, with movement, with a hint of acting, she is telling a story. She uses descriptive words and her own careful study and imaginations of historical people and scenes to paint pictures in her students' minds. She is conscious of her goal to transport students to the time and place they are studying, to bring the figures and scenes alive for her students. She sets the stage by describing the geography, landscape, and climate in which events will take place. She introduces individual figures by describing their backgrounds, sometimes including details and anecdotes from their childhoods, proceeding to physical descriptions and the telling qualities or shortcomings of their characters and temperaments, especially those that are relevant to the events to come. She introduces the hopes and thoughts of these characters, and she draws out the circumstances in which they

act. Quotations are read aloud, and images of scenes, maps, and the figures are projected for reference and student observation. The true story of history proceeds apace in the present tense, and the underlying drama that has lodged the historical moment in the enduring memory of a nation breaks through, arriving at a crescendo of action in an event and leading gloriously or malignantly to its consequences for subsequent events, for today, and for the student. This is the first kind of speech our guest hears.

The teacher's second kind of speech repeatedly punctuates this kind of story and moves it along through questions to her students. Questions of who, what, when, and where, but more often and more importantly, questions of why and how: "Why does he do this? Why does she think that? Why does this happen? How did this come about? What will he, she, or they do, and why do you think that?" Question upon question, lending suspense and drawing students into the telling of the story with their answers and thoughts and wrestling with what really happened, and with the final questions of "Why?" and the all-important "What does this mean?" "What does this show us about America, about human beings, about ourselves?"

These questions are not rhetorical, and the class is therefore not a mere lecture. Instead, students seek to answer the questions throughout the class period, raising their hands, offering answers and reasons, engaging one another with respect. The result is a dynamic exchange of thoughts and reasoning, moving the class forward, and involving teacher, students, and historical figures all in the same story and conversation.

While civics class may have less of the story element, our guest will also observe in both history and civics the words of the past speaking directly to the students through primary sources. In history, students read or the teacher reads aloud portions of the foundational and most influential documents in American history,

gleaning direct insights into the minds of American figures, and linking the episodes presented via story. In civics, the close and careful reading of the primary sources fills the minutes to their fullest. Students frequently learn to know by heart portions of these works. And in both history and civics, lively, civil conversations are held among all the students and the teacher as the class revolves around the text in search of what it is saying. And then, students attempt to answer the questions once more: "Is it true?" "Why?" and "What does it mean?"

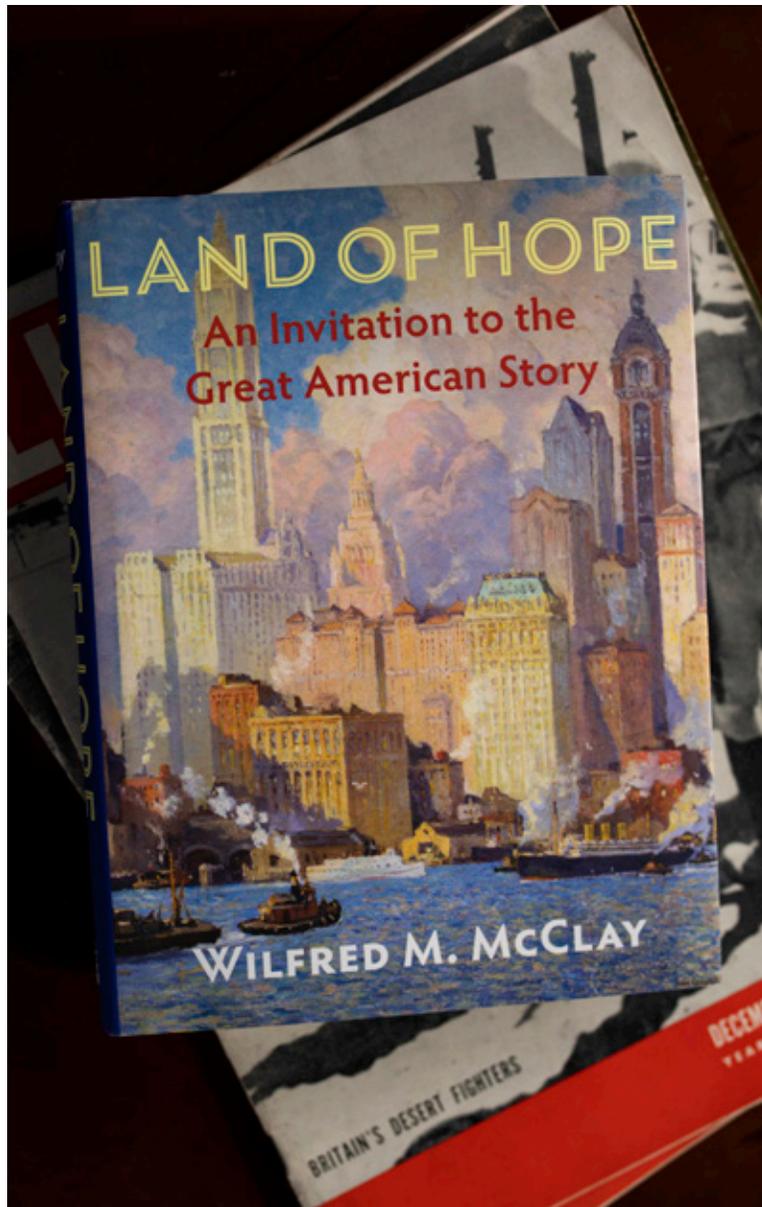
And what is the goal of it all? What is the goal of each lesson and unit?

Knowledge, surely, and understanding and images to furnish the moral imagination. And wise and virtuous citizens who will engage in and fulfill their civic responsibilities. But above all and as with all learning, the goal is the experience of encountering and discovering something that the student had not known before, something that has changed what he knows of reality, that pulls him to desire and dare to learn more, that pierces him with a fearful joy: wonder, the source of all learning and of wisdom itself.

For at the heart of history and civic education, as with any subject of study, is a sharing of love. The teacher loves both her content, which she deeply seeks to know, and her students. In loving each, she desires what is good for both content and students. For the sake of each, she brings content and students together through a moment of wonder, that students might know and then love what they study.

In the case of American history and civics, such a sharing of love in teaching offers students the wonder, opportunity, and capacity to honor and preserve what is good in their country, while condemning and correcting its flaws, for the good of America and their fellow Americans.

Such a knowledge and love is the very highest meaning of patriotism.



Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story by Wilfred McClay

For the American Student

The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum asks simply, in light of the vastness of reality and the limits of human existence, “What do American students in particular need and, most importantly, deserve to encounter and consider in their K-12 civic education?” The answer is first knowledge and understanding of American history and of the American republic as governed by the Constitution and morally grounded in the Declaration of Independence. The teachers who contributed to this curriculum are mindful of and experienced in the great and important changes in student development between grade levels, yet are also deferential to the circumstances and autonomy of local communities. This curriculum thus organizes the teaching of American history and civics into grade-level bands to provide the greatest usefulness as well as breadth for adjustment by states, districts, schools, teachers, and parents.



A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves by Eastman Johnson | Public Domain

There are four grade level bands: Kindergarten through 2nd grade, 3rd through 5th grade, middle school, and high school. A school may use the units for any of the grades within a grade band. The curriculum has attempted to address the differences in student ability, but ultimately schools and teachers, given the students they have in their charge, must determine the appropriate adjustments for their situations.

This curriculum outlines simply what is most essential, and far more details of comparably less historical influence can and will be taught in relationship with these topics based on each teacher's own study of the recommended resources.

Regarding integrating civics with other subjects, civics should play its role in history as well as in the other subjects, but it should not take over any given subject. Rather, civics topics should arise where naturally appropriate instead of reducing literature, science, mathematics, etc., to mere components of politics or, worse, political activism.



The Battle of Long Island by Domenick D'Andrea | Public Domain

This curriculum respects the inherent dignity of both the student and historical figures. It does not whitewash or rewrite. It also does not ignore “warts,” if those “warts”—as with America’s noblest moments—are significant enough to fit the time restraints of K-12 schooling. It does not claim to be immune to conversation or disagreement, or to be “the last word.” But it does argue that this content is true, and that it is what American students should learn first.

Paying greater attention to injustices may in fact be warranted. But to force all of history through this myopic lens not only misses the whole picture but is no better than the histories such an approach claims to correct.

There is no reason to ignore the bad and emphasize the good, or vice versa: both deserve to be taught as they were and students deserve to know the entire truth.

Lastly, this curriculum only very carefully takes the stance of “consider the times,” for this phrase can easily give the impression that truth and morality (good and evil) are merely relative to one’s viewpoint or time period. “To consider the times” in which historical figures lived is not to excuse moral injustices or to justify relativism, but it requires us to understand the circumstances at the time and weigh them against principles that transcend time. It is recognizing the reality of history and honestly assessing how figures at the time acted within their circumstances in light of the truth.

The sequence is outlined on the following pages:

Elementary School

Kindergarten–2nd Grade

American History

- UNIT 1** | The British Colonies of North America
- UNIT 2** | The American Founding
- UNIT 3** | The Early Republic
- UNIT 4** | The American Civil War

3rd–5th Grade

American History

- UNIT 1** | The British Colonies of North America
- UNIT 2** | The American Founding
- UNIT 3** | The Early Republic
- UNIT 4** | The American Civil War

Middle School

6th–8th Grade

American History

- UNIT 1** | The British Colonies of North America
- UNIT 2** | The American Founding
- UNIT 3** | The Early Republic
- UNIT 4** | The American Civil War
- UNIT 5** | The Turn of the Century
- UNIT 6** | The Interwar Years and World War II
- UNIT 7** | Post-War America
- UNIT 8** | Recent American History

American Civics

- UNIT 1** | The Declaration of Independence
- UNIT 2** | The United States Constitution
- UNIT 3** | Politics and Policy
- UNIT 4** | Challenging and Defending America's Principles

High School

9th–12th Grade

American History

- UNIT 1** | The British Colonies of North America
- UNIT 2** | The American Founding
- UNIT 3** | The Early Republic
- UNIT 4** | The American Civil War
- UNIT 5** | The Turn of the Century
- UNIT 6** | The Interwar Years and World War II
- UNIT 7** | Post-War America
- UNIT 8** | Recent American

American Government and Politics

- UNIT 1** | The Principles of America
- UNIT 2** | A Constitution of Principles
- UNIT 3** | Governing in the Constitution
- UNIT 4** | Equality in America
- UNIT 5** | Progressivism and the State
- UNIT 6** | Institutions and Policy
- UNIT 7** | Politics in Practice
- UNIT 8** | Late 20th Century Government and Politics
- OPTIONAL CIVICS ACTIVITIES** | Fostering Civic Responsibility



U.S. Capitol Rotunda | Source: iStockphoto.com

Clarity and Simplicity

Great teachers often have a natural gift for teaching others, but *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* supposes that any American who loves to learn, loves students, possesses a determined work ethic, and is open to improvement can become a high-quality teacher. Regardless of experience and abilities, every teacher deserves guidance that is clear, simple, and helpful, and such order and ease on the part of the teacher's materials will translate into clear lessons for students.

The form of this curriculum, therefore, follows these principles of its intended function. It strives to demystify teaching from the cumbersome lingo, administrative complexities, and “bells-and-whistles” busyness associated with many curricula. We hope and trust that teachers will find this layout clear and refreshing.

Two facets to this structure are worthy of special note.

Keys to the Lesson

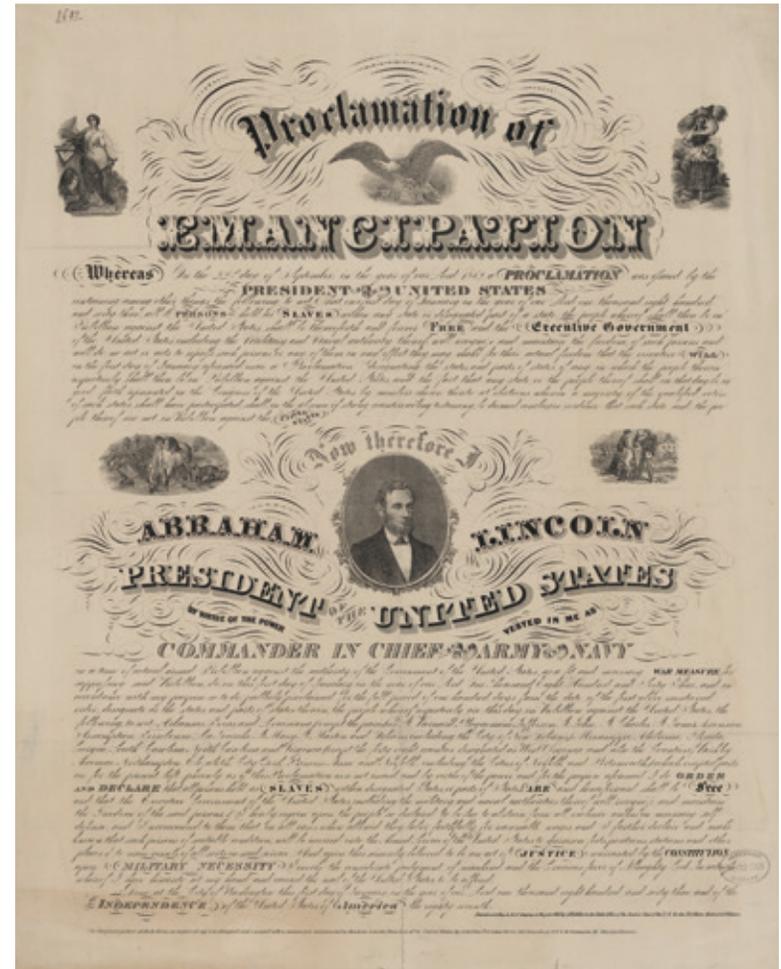
This curriculum does not tell the teacher exactly what he or she needs to teach or tell students. To dictate such content robs teachers of the joy of learning, robs students of the vibrancy of being taught by teachers who have genuinely studied their content, and disrespects the intellect and capacity of teachers to learn and teach according to their own pursuits of truth. What this curriculum offers instead are recommended resources and approaches that teachers may learn from but also engage with and question as they seek what is true.

The Keys to the Lesson include an initial recommendation on how to approach teaching the lesson in general, followed by a series of bullet-point suggestions on specific content areas, topics, and parts of the lesson. These suggestions usually highlight

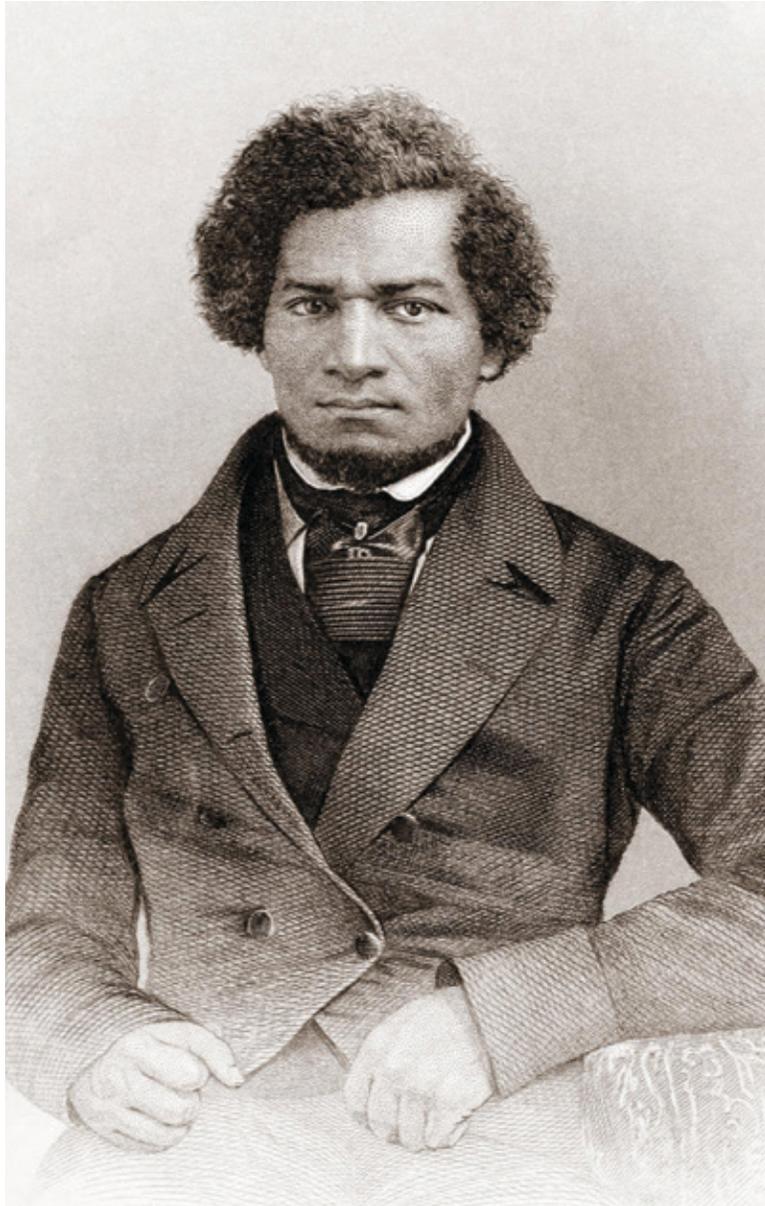
points of emphasis, ways to approach certain texts or topics, and clarifications for accuracy of instruction. The order of these suggestions is generally the order in which the lesson may be best taught. As the name denotes, these statements are considered the keys to teaching the lesson with accuracy, effectiveness, and with a mind toward cultivating student engagement, class conversation, and meaningful, enduring understanding. They are meant to be guideposts for teachers to consider, not exclusive requirements to be followed blindly.

Primary Sources

Primary source handouts with applicable guiding reading questions (where a primary source is meant to be given as a preparatory assignment) accompany each unit. Each primary source includes information on its author, its date, and its location, and a very straightforward explanation of how it came to be. The goal of this information is to help bring the author and document alive for students by calling to mind the very real person who created it and the circumstances in which it was drafted. The text of each source has line numbers for ease of reference during in-class conversations, ample spacing between lines for annotations, and a wider right-hand margin for notetaking during reading or a seminar conversation. The number, length, and use of primary sources vary by grade level, but reading aloud short portions of primary sources is an important part of instruction in even the youngest grades. Teachers should adapt the scope of the primary sources to fit the abilities of their students and the actual content taught in class.



Kidder copy of the Emancipation Proclamation | Source: Library of Congress



Frederick Douglass as a Younger Man | Public Domain

The Freedom to Teach

The best and most sincere teachers understand teaching to be a vocation. Love for content and students draws them to such a challenging, demanding, and high-stakes career. Often this calling was first awakened when the teacher was herself a student. She experienced the wonder that her own teachers had cultivated through their instruction. The sense of great responsibility for the formation of a child called to her. It is not uncommon for a teacher to say that the reason she teaches is because of a teacher or professor she had as a student. How disappointing and tragic, then, that many teachers rarely get to focus on the art of teaching.

What are teachers doing instead? The list seems to grow by the school year: almost endless administrative paperwork, mostly tied to ever-evolving state and federal reporting requirements or test preparation; unnecessarily bureaucratic expectations for lesson plans; ever-changing and ever-increasing complexity in new technology, curricula, and pedagogical methods; student discipline policies that neither correct nor form student behavior and character, leaving teachers to manage a kind of chaos in some schools; and constant “box-checking” for teacher certification requirements and maintenance.

And when teachers are able, from time to time, to escape these burdens and actually arrive at teaching, they are handed what is little more than a script from which to read, dictating to them exactly what to say, how to say it, and what to do next by this kind of instruction manual. Some skill-based subjects may be well conducted in this manner, but history and civics are not.

While other efforts will be necessary to address many of the above infringements on actually teaching, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* attempts to restore and defend teachers’ freedom to teach in at least this final respect. Although it outlines content that students should probably encounter, vets resources, and offers some

considerations for teachers, it defers entirely to the knowledge, creative ingenuity, and love of each teacher to plan out and present lessons. Sound, tried and true pedagogical principles—framed by genuine love of a subject—should shape lesson planning and teaching¹ (see “Pedagogy: Sharing a Love”). This curriculum empowers the teacher to rediscover that original love of learning and that original sense of wonder and care for students that led her to become a teacher. Each lesson taught using this curriculum should be unique to the teacher and students of a particular classroom at a particular school.

The curriculum is designed to empower teachers with the freedom to teach. What we wish to offer, then, are a handful of suggestions on how teachers might consider using *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, whether their school has officially adopted the curriculum or they use it to supplement and enhance their existing lessons.

Planning the Lesson

1. **Teachers review the Teacher Preparation Resources, including Hillsdale-vetted texts and Online Courses lectures.**
2. **Teachers then write out their lesson notes.**

For History Classes, teachers write and craft their lesson plans as much as possible as a narrative—a good story, and a true one. Taking on the mindset of a film director can be helpful in this process, asking, “What words must I use and in what order must I present things to bring the figures and scenes alive for my students?” Reflecting on the student and teacher resources, teachers may ask other questions, such as: What background information should I pull in? What should I dwell



Wilfred McClay teaches the online course, Land of Hope | Hillsdale College

upon in detail, and what may I summarize? What will students want to know more about? What can I anticipate them asking? What do I want to know more about? What specific stories will I tell? Which questions will I ask? When? Where should I build suspense? At what actions or scenes or choices do I wish students to wonder? What images will I show and when? How might a specific class period conclude? After the teacher’s notes have been drafted, teachers may review the Core Content, Stories, Questions, and Keys to the Lesson sections of the curriculum lesson to see if anything has been missed. If so, they determine the best way and places to incorporate this content, these questions, and these considerations.

¹ J. Stockard, T. W. Wood, C. Coughlin, and Khoury C. Rasplica, “The Effectiveness of Direct Instruction Curricula: A Meta-Analysis of a Half Century of Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 4 (2018): 479–507.

For Civics Classes, teachers review the Terms and Topic, Questions, and Keys to the Lesson outlined in the curriculum lesson. With these in mind, they read through the primary sources and craft a lesson plan that mainly uses the reading and discussion of primary sources to drive the lesson. Most lessons can be conducted as a full or partial seminar conversation.

3. **Teachers determine what Preparatory and Post-Lesson Assignments and Activities may be warranted.**
4. **Teachers decide what images and stories to share with students.**

Presenting the Lesson

1. **Teachers begin with review.**
2. **Teachers become storytellers and/or let the primary source tell its story.** Like a good movie, play, or book, teachers employ storytelling practices and variations in tone, voice, and pacing. They acquire the disposition of an actor or performer without reducing class to a reenactment. A certain gravitas, seriousness, and drama should come through. For teachers who have studied their content and care for it, such wonder and sincerity will naturally animate their presentation and they arrange for moments in which students may experience wonder. If class is composed mainly of a primary source, teachers read and discuss the text with the same principles in mind, seeking to understand the speaker on his or her own terms first.
3. **Teachers ask an abundance of questions.** They help students remain engaged, grow in understanding, and enter into the history or primary source by having students help tell the story through their answers to questions. Questions of fact will of course arise, but teachers focus especially on asking questions of “How,” “Why,” and “Why do you think

that?” Class is not a lecture but rather a dynamic, teacher-led conversation among all the students, turning around the topic at hand in pursuit of truth.

Refining Understanding

1. **Teachers assess students.** Tests are a somewhat useful but imperfect tool to measure a certain kind of learning. But perhaps the more important and more overlooked use of quality tests is the opportunity they afford students to reflect, review, and more accurately understand what they have learned. The great value of tests in this curriculum, therefore, is how they can help students to reflect and understand by studying for the test. Each included study guide is based on a refined version of the lesson outline. Students should personally review their notes, along with reviewing as a class, to re-engage with what they have learned. In this sense, the study guide is a true guide to studying. It is meant to lead students back through what they learned through their notes. Students should grow in familiarity with the unit’s stories and ideas and how they are connected; they should be able to recount episodes and answer the deeper questions. This type of study and review is an excellent opportunity for students to synthesize the various parts of what they have learned, to see how it all fits together, and to adjust their understanding of reality accordingly. The test, then, is merely an opportunity for students to demonstrate this growth in knowledge and understanding.
2. **Teachers allow students the time to reflect, think, and write.** After a unit test, teachers use the writing assignments to provide students with the space and time to consider a question that strikes at the heart of the entire unit. Students may have some time in class to work on their response and

be instructed in good writing, but some writing may be completed independently, at least for older students. With the broad topic having been reviewed and tested, students should benefit from the freedom to engage one final time with the topic in a way that applies their intellect to form a deeper, long-lasting understanding.

Two Insights

First, teachers ought to make each lesson their own. The structure, recommendations, and resources provided in this curriculum are meant to be a trustworthy starting point and guide but should by no means be restrictive. They are meant to offer a sense of order within which teachers rediscover the freedom and joy of teaching.

Second, this curriculum eschews a number of relatively novel curriculum and pedagogical trends. We are well familiar with these practices, often theorized in academia and promulgated through preparation programs and bureaucratic agencies. Should a practice not appear in this curriculum, it is not necessarily ineffective or wrong (though we believe some are), and this curriculum can be taught with many different pedagogical approaches employed in modern classrooms but not listed here. We believe, however, that the methods recommended in this curriculum are the best and most consistent means of raising students in enduring knowledge and understanding while cultivating strong critical thinking skills. We have made these determinations over time, through careful thought and classroom experience, and have opted for what has been tried and true for decades, centuries, and even millennia: tried, because they have formed the civilization we have inherited, and true, because they accord with the way the world is, the way people are, and the way people come to know the world.



A History Read-Aloud



Lincoln Monument, Washington, D.C. | Source: iStockphoto.com

What Is Needed

It is common in education policy to release a new program, curriculum, or initiative, followed with directives on what needs to be done to make them succeed. Here we, too, outline what is necessary, but our recommendation is very different. It is not more money, more government action and control, or more hoops to jump through. Instead, what is needed for civic education to succeed in America is freedom and prudence.

Freedom

In education, the United States must restore the freedom to make decisions to those who are closest to the communities most directly affected by them.

Decision authority on what curriculum is used, how to teach, how to assess, and what schools to attend should be reclaimed from Washington, the Department of Education, state bureaucracies, and teaching colleges and departments. The power to make such choices should be repossessed by state legislators, local school districts, and school boards, all of whom are accountable to voters, and to the administration and teachers of each school, who are accountable to parents when they elect to enroll their students at the school.

The preparation of teachers should be reclaimed from costly and time-consuming university system and certification agencies. The process for forming high-quality teachers should be repossessed by local school districts and schools, where new hires can earn a living while being mentored and coached by the best veteran teachers, who are themselves compensated for their support. This is how teachers learn to be great teachers: by observing and being observed by the great teachers before them.

The creation of lesson plans should be reclaimed from corporate textbook publishers and state and federal mandates. This process should be repossessed by teachers, as this curriculum permits, in order to restore the freedom to teach with passion and ingenuity by empowered teachers.

State standards should be specific on the foundational content and skills students should share, particularly as content pertains to the principles and history of our common heritage, but state standards should otherwise allow flexibility for schools and teachers. National standards and civics funding tied to such standards, moreover, violate the principle of federalism and allow one position to crowd out the insights and sovereignty of local citizens, parents, and teachers. Federal policymakers and states operating under the guise of collaborative federalism should not force national civics standards and funding into states, districts, and local schools.

While it may be fitting to require high school students to pass the 2020 Civics Test used to naturalize immigrants as new U.S. citizens, accountability in history and civics does not require another standardized test. Instead, states should simply require that schools and school districts publish on their websites outlines of the specific lessons they teach students in history and civics. Parents can read for themselves if fundamental knowledge about America is being taught and if it is being taught accurately. And for recourse they can elect new school board members or else vote with their feet and move their students to a different school. Many of the assignments included in this curriculum are aimed at including parents in the education of their children, or at least making sure they are not barred from knowing what their children are being taught.

Just as federal standards and assessments are not the solution, federal money is not the solution for improving civics and history education. In fact, each of the above-mentioned restorations of freedom will save money, not increase expenses, for schools, teachers, and taxpaying citizens.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. | Source: National Archives Catalog

What is needed is greater freedom of time.

Teachers need time to learn more—not merely about how to teach but especially about what to teach, i.e., about their subject matter. Teachers need to drink deeply from great histories, from free online courses such as what Hillsdale College offers, and have time to plan dynamic lessons rather than be encumbered by administrative paperwork.

And students need time—time in the day to learn and engage with and think about history and civics². The most meaningful change that state policymakers and schools can make in this regard is to defend and even expand the amount of time allotted for American history and civics instruction each school day. But this instruction should be devoted to engagement with content, not merely time-filling activities or action civics in which students become the pawns of adults who push political ideology.

² Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek, *Social Studies Instruction and Reading Comprehension: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 2020).

Prudence

For any of the above to happen, prudence must rule in the hearts and minds of those who are in positions of power to make them realities. This prudence requires a clear-sightedness for the principles of America and of civic education, and a humility to seek out their application to specific circumstances. It requires courage and discretion to shift control over education from powerful and centralized interests and back to local schools, individual teachers, and the voting citizens of a community. It requires a care for the well-being of students, a respect for their inherent dignity and rational yet impressionable hearts and minds, which deserve the often beautiful but sometimes ugly truth of American history. And it requires an American's love for his or her country, a love that can see and appreciate the good in America, recognize the bad, and strive always to preserve what is good and condemn what is not—all for the sake of the truths on which America was founded, in honor of those who sacrificed and died to defend them, and for the good of present and future generations of young Americans.



Landing Craft delivering Troops to Omaha Beach during D-Day, World War II |
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Jacksonville Classical Academy

Real Teachers, Real Classrooms, Real Students

The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum is a reflection of Hillsdale College's *K-12 Program Guide*, which serves as the basis of instruction in Hillsdale-affiliated schools. The *K-12 Program Guide* itself reflects parts of the education of which college students partake on Hillsdale's campus. The specific materials in this curriculum, however, are the creation of the very best K-12 teachers, at Hillsdale classical schools, both past and present.



Dear Teacher,

As you know, teaching is one of the most important professions in human history. As an institution whose purpose it is to teach, we at Hillsdale College are acutely aware of what it takes to teach and to teach well, especially today. We thank you for taking up this charge in general and this curriculum in particular. We hope and trust that it will serve you and your students in the ways that you and they most deserve.

The pursuit of truth is an unapologetic pursuit. For those who strive for honesty, it cannot be otherwise. As such, you the teacher should be aware of the truths which Hillsdale College holds to be accessible to human reason, proven through the ages, and true of all people and all times. This curriculum is based on these truths. They are as follows.

- That truth is objective, according to the first law of logic, the law of contradiction: that something cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same way. The first object of the human mind and the first end of education is this objective truth about the world.
- That the good is that at which all actions, however misguided or distorted, aim. The good shows us how we ought to act, which we call right moral conduct.
- That human nature is good but also limited, flawed, and prone to do what is wrong.
- That while an individual may conduct himself and form his character to align with what is good over his lifetime, human nature itself does not fundamentally change or progress.

- That because this is the nature of human beings, and human beings make up government, government will always be capable of tyranny and mismanagement.
- That individuals should be judged based on their specific actions tending toward a certain character instead of their label, group identity, sex, religion, or skin color.
- That civic knowledge, personal virtue, patriotism, respect for the rule of law, and civil free speech are absolutely necessary for young students to learn for a free and self-governing society to persevere.
- That the more important thing in American history is that which has endured rather than that which has passed, that is, America's founding principles which have outlasted and extinguished from law various forms of evil, such as slavery, racism, and other violations of the equal protection of natural rights.
- That although the United States of America is by no means perfect, it is unprecedented in the annals of human history for the extraordinary degrees of freedom, peace, and prosperity available to its people and to those who immigrate to her shores.
- That these unprecedented benefits are the result of its founding ideas and of those who have bravely sacrificed to prove these principles true—the principles that all men are created equal in their human dignity and possession of certain natural rights, that government exists solely to protect these rights and to promote the public good, and that people ought to govern themselves and respect the rights of one another.
- That for these reasons, America is an exceptionally good country.

With these principles in mind, dive into your subject.

Learn it, wonder at it, love it, and teach so your students will, too.

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The Hillsdale
1776
Curriculum

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K-12 Education

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Hillsdale's K-12 team operates from the Stanton Foundation Center for American Classical Education on the campus of Hillsdale College.

For questions about affiliated schools or inquiries about how to receive Hillsdale College K-12 support or curriculum, please email us at **k12@hillsdale.edu**

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