

Putting the Teaching of American History and Civics back in the classroom

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Witness:

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Testimony:

Senator Alexander, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify here today on a subject that is vital to the future of this country, on which you yourself long have worked on, and on which you recently have spoken so eloquently.

During Alex Haley's 12 years researching his groundbreaking novel, *Roots*, he traveled the globe to uncover his family's story, even taking a slow Atlantic crossing to get some feel for what his ancestors went through on the Middle Passage. He also spent many hours in the reading rooms of the Library of Congress, poring over American Missionary Society files from our Manuscript Collection.

For the first 190 years of the Library's existence, people could access our vast collections only by traveling to Washington, D.C., and by working in our beautiful reading rooms as Mr. Haley did—or by tapping into our rich holdings secondhand, through books that made use of our collections.

Let me suggest the educational value of the primary materials we have already made available free of charge on-line.

The Library of Congress is actively supporting the teaching of history and civics in the classroom and can be a key player in your program to establish academies for students and to create a national alliance for teachers. Indeed, the Library has already taken important steps in this direction.

The technology revolution of the past decade has made it possible for the Library to reach far beyond its buildings in Washington. We now deliver 8 million interesting and educational multimedia documents, maps, and images of American history and culture free of charge to stimulate curiosity and humanize the study of history. By exploiting the power of the Internet and the incomparable resources of our collections, the Library of Congress has emerged as the leading provider of free noncommercial educational content on the World Wide Web. Millions of educators, librarians, students, and lifelong learners visit our Web sites daily for materials that once were available only through our reading rooms on Capitol Hill.

The Library's Web sites are attracting more than 2.5 billion "hits" a year. They have won many awards, including the prestigious Global Information Infrastructure Award as the best in education. The Harvard Education Letter praised the Library's on-line historical materials for encouraging students to question, observe details, and think critically.

By offering easy access to the key documents, events, ideas, and people of American history, the Library is uniquely positioned to support the goals of educators everywhere through its various electronic initiatives. Thanks to generous support from the Congress and the American people, the Library has grown into the largest repository of knowledge and information in the history of the world. The Library shares its resources with educators who can use them in the classroom to bring to life what their students have only read about in books.

American Memory was established as a pilot in 1990 as one of the first large-scale efforts to use the Internet to disseminate high-quality educational and cultural content.

The National Digital Library program has created an on-line archives of more than 100 collections of important, rare, and unique items in all formats documenting America's cultural heritage. The materials were selected from the Library of Congress as well as from 36 other American institutions, making the National Digital Library a truly national effort.

Students get to work with primary sources: manuscripts; maps, which you can zoom in on and view with greater clarity than with the naked eye; prints and photographs; and music. These are the actual stuff of history, not about history. These resources encourage critical thinking in students and inspire learners to further exploration. The multimedia American Memory Collections include papers of the U.S. Presidents, Civil War photographs, early films of Thomas Edison, historic speeches, the first baseball cards, and oral histories representing our diverse culture.

The Learning Page Web site, introduced in 1996 as a companion to the American Memory Collections, is a key component of our educational outreach program. Specifically designed for K-12 educators and their students, the Learning Page helps teachers harness the power of these primary sources with ideas and instructions for accessing the collections on a vast range of topics. Here, the content of the Library's digital collections is presented within an educational context, with lesson plans, curriculum guides, "how to" projects, and learning activities—making the educational experience a dynamic, stimulating and interactive activity like reading—not a passive spectator experience like television.

On this page teachers, at the click of a mouse, can search the collections, try out lesson plans, engage in classroom activities, connect with other teachers, ask a librarian for help, view a lecture or a poetry reading, or visit more than 40 exhibitions.

Our American Memory Fellows Institute could serve in many ways as a pilot for your program to establish a national alliance of teachers. This institute has successfully trained

a network of teachers across the country who are teaching other educators in their localities what they have learned at the Library about using primary sources in the classroom. Over a five-year period, more than 300 “master educators” from nearly every state participated in a year-long professional development program highlighted by a six-day summer institute held at the Library.

Teams of educators worked directly with the Library staff and primary source materials to develop lesson plans and teaching materials based on the Library’s on-line materials. These teacher-developed lesson plans were “road-tested” with students and colleagues. They are now available electronically to all teachers through the Learning Page Web site. Today, this alliance of teachers, connected virtually through our Learning Page, is teaching other teachers how to use primary sources to stimulate critical thinking in their students. But we need to reach teachers in all of the nation’s 15,000 school districts.

We are already reaching children and their families directly through our new Web site called America’s Library. It is fun for children and their families as well as for educators, and is currently attracting more than 22 million “hits” per month. The site combines child-friendly graphics with the incomparable American collections of the Library in more than 4,500 stories about our nation’s past. Interactive elements on the site teach searching with a “scavenger hunt,” offer a virtual tour around America, and give the opportunity to “send a postcard” on-line.

The Library is also linking the world’s resources with America’s schools through its Global Gateway Initiative. This Web site represents a collaboration between the Library of Congress and the national libraries of Russia, Brazil, Spain, and the Netherlands. Our growing collaboration with the greatest libraries and universities in the world, combined with the power of the Internet, puts the Library in a pivotal position in the new era of global education. And through the Portals to the World section of the site, the Library’s area-studies specialists provide links to vetted and reliable materials from more than 130 countries. When completed, this project will bring free to America’s classrooms resource materials from all the nations of the world.

Our new monthly magazine, *The Wise Guide*, offers articles that encourage newcomers to our Web site to explore the wealth of the Library’s on-line educational programs.

By being the largest provider of free noncommercial high-quality content on the Internet, the Library is reaching students, their teachers—and all learners—with the documents, sounds, films, maps, music, and other artifacts that tell the story of America. This can be an inspirational as well as educational enhancement for the new initiatives this committee is considering.