

Using Local History to Build Understanding

by Kevin Sheehan, Caitlin Connelly, Kathleen Huber, and Christina Joseph

In the fourth-grade in New York State, social studies is designed to be part of the expanding universe curriculum. If you embrace the philosophy of the state, you realize the student's universe expands from family to community to other communities and communities around the world. Finally, in fourth grade, the universe expands to embrace history, the specific history of a community long ago. In order to effectively teach about a community in the past, it is necessary to teach about the United States and New York State to provide a context for events taking place in the community. In other words, if we are to teach about our community during the American Revolution, we have to also teach the American Revolution. Although fourth grade social studies is supposed to be centered on local history, the benchmarks of American history are so complex and overpowering that the essence of local history often gets lost in the shuffle. We feel fall of fifth grade is the ideal time to recapture our unique local histories.

We have created an essential question and a unit plan to drive a review unit centered around the history of Oceanside, New York. This unit is online at <http://www.sheehansocialstudies.com/70601.html>. While the unit is based on the history of Oceanside, the history of any local community can be plugged into the template. We start with the essential question, "*In what ways does the history of our local community reflect the fourth grade history that we studied last year?*" In order to answer this question, students reflect on their community's involvement with Native Americans, first settlements during America's colonial period, and the impact of industrialization on their community. As they dig into their own local histories, students reinforce and strengthen their knowledge of the benchmarks of United States and New York State history.

The unit outline is based on *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). Their basic premise is that teachers ought to understand what it is they want their students to understand as well as know and do before they teach a unit. Students should function as social scientists and historians and uncover their own truth. In this case, students use *History Alive* strategies (Bower & Lobdell, 2005) and take a weekly time machine ride back into local history. Students can create a mural of their trip through local history. A crucial ingredient in this project is parents. This unit comes with materials that enable parents to become part of the research process.

We invite you to pilot this program in your district. Use the template and plug in your own local history. If you are interested in collaboration, email me at Ksheehan1@Molloy.edu.

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