



## NEWS RELEASE

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## Report: Why Americans Don't Know Their History and How to Change It

### *Woodrow Wilson Foundation Conducts Deep Dive Into Current Practice of American History Teaching, Dispelling Urban Legends About Instructional Challenges Today*

PRINCETON, NJ (May 7, 2019) — The vast majority of Americans couldn't pass the U.S. citizenship test when asked test questions in a recent 50-state survey, but that's not because their teachers failed them or because students are no longer required to study American history. It's because the American history curriculum has focused on memorization of names, events, and dates, which students find irrelevant, boring, random, and fail to retain beyond their class test. So finds a new report [bit.ly/AmericanHistoryReportWW](http://bit.ly/AmericanHistoryReportWW) from the [Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](http://www.woodrow-wilson.org).

The Woodrow Wilson Foundation (WW) report found that 39 states and Washington, DC require students to study U.S. history in middle school, and 42 states and DC require one American history class in high school for graduation. Among high school social science teachers, 83 percent are certified in social sciences and 79 percent majored in American history or a related social science discipline.

Despite that, 28 states have transitioned to a more dynamic way of learning history through the [National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](http://www.nationalcouncilonss.org) since they were released in 2013, which means the majority of Americans were educated on history curricula stressing memorization and short-term recall of facts.

“We believe this current lack of knowledge of American history represents an extraordinary challenge to our nation and our schools in an age in which the country is deeply divided and confidence in social institutions is low,” WW President Arthur Levine said. “Based on our analysis, this is not an issue of whether high school history teachers are adequately prepared or whether children today even study American history in school. The answer to both questions is yes. This is an issue of how we teach American history and whether today's learners see relevance and are engaged in what and how history is taught.”

The report comes after a groundbreaking [50-state poll](#) conducted by WW earlier this year that revealed only four in 10 Americans can pass a 20-question test based on questions from the U.S. citizenship exam. Even more disturbing, only 27 percent of those under the age of 45 nationally can demonstrate a basic understanding of American history.

“Knowledge of American history must serve as an anchor in a time when change assails us, serving as a laboratory for studying the changes that are occurring and a vehicle for establishing a common bond when social divisions are deep. This requires a fundamental change in how American history is taught and learned to make it relevant to our students' lives, to make it captivating and to make it inclusive to all Americans,” Levine said.

The WW Foundation studied learning sciences research to better understand how American history can best be taught. There were two major findings. First, passive instruction, reliance on textbooks and lectures, memorization of dates and names, and broad shallow coverage represent poor practice. Second, best practice requires student engagement, application of problem solving and critical thinking skills, interactive pedagogies, deep understanding of the subject, broad inclusion of learners, and making the subject relevant to learners.

Applying these lessons, the Foundation is launching a major national initiative to transform how American history is learned today, providing high school students with an interactive digital platform intended to make American history more engaging and exciting to all learners, particularly those who do not see the importance history plays in the present and future.

Relying on the latest developments in cognitive learning, the WW American History Initiative will offer experiential learning opportunities, such as videos, simulations, digital games, and graphic novels. Building on the Foundation's successful WW [HistoryQuest Fellowship](#) professional development program for social studies and history teachers, which is planning to expand to new states, the Initiative will also provide resources and learning opportunities for K–12 history teachers to improve their instructional practice, making American history instruction more engaging and relevant to students today.

Scheduled to launch later this year, the WW platform will serve as an aggregator for engrossing and engaging history instruction, directing users to a wealth of high-quality digital resources currently available through museums, institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations government agencies and individuals. The Initiative is designed to supplement traditional classroom instruction, providing learners the opportunity dig deeper into the topics that interest them the most while embracing interactive, experiential learning opportunities generally not available during a traditional school day.

The WW American History Initiative is made possible through the generous support of individual donors and supplemented through grants by the Carnegie Corporation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Lilly Endowment, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and many individual donors.

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#### **About the 50-State Survey**

Lincoln Park Strategies conducted the poll for the Foundation. It involved 41,000 interviews among adults nationwide. The margin of error is approximately  $\pm 1.0$  %.

#### **About the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation**

Founded in 1945, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation ([www.woodrow.org](http://www.woodrow.org)) identifies and develops the nation's best minds to meet its most critical challenges. The Foundation supports its Fellows as the next generation of leaders shaping American society.