



**Student Sleuth Project: Investigating
Your School's History**



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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Educator's Note and Program Overview | 4 |
| Logistics Planning Chart..... | 5 |
| Logistics Planning Sheet | 6 |
| Student Sleuth Project Flyer | 9 |
| Parent Permission Form | 10 |
| School Inventory Worksheet | 11 |
| Interview Ideas | 12 |
| Tips When Interviewing and Recording Someone | 13 |
| Interviewing Dos and Don'ts..... | 14 |
| Interview Evaluation Sheet: How'd I Do? | 15 |
| Fact Finding Sheet | 16 |
| Exhibition Check List..... | 18 |
| Extending the Project School-Wide: School Tile Project..... | 19 |
| Sample Tiles from John Eaton Elementary School's Centennial History Project..... | 20 |
| Washington, DC Resources | 21 |

Educator's Note and Program Overview



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

As John Eaton Elementary School in Washington, DC approached its centennial anniversary, school educators wanted to develop a program to engage students to learn more about their school's history. The result was the Student Sleuth Project, a three-month program involving 18 fourth graders that allowed students to develop research skills and gain a greater understanding of their school's history. The students' efforts culminated with an exhibition that documented Eaton's past and the world-at-large from 1911-2011.

SKILLS GAINED

Researching; locating historical resources; interviewing; examining school history in a broader context; working in teams; and designing an exhibition.

PROGRAM ORGANIZATION

The program was divided into three month-long modules:



Locating historical resources: Students learned how to conduct research and located information about their school. They had guest speakers, who presented mini-lectures that often turned into lively conversations. Students toured institutions where historical research and archiving occurs. There, they saw and handled artifacts that related to their school. They also met with a folk-life specialist who taught them how best to interview people.



Conducting research and compiling evidence: Students divided into working groups and conducted research on their school, its surrounding neighborhood, Washington, DC, and the nation between 1911-2011. They culled through documents and books, conducted interviews, created timelines, and compiled information.



Designing an engaging exhibition: Students organized their data and findings to make the information visually interesting and meaningful. They had a behind-the-scenes tour at a nearby museum and learned the principles of exhibition design before creating their own display at school. The project finished with an [exhibition in the school library](#) where students showcased their work, which a local paper, The Northwest Current, wrote about in its [June 15, 2011 issue](#).

EXTENDING THE PROJECT SCHOOL-WIDE

To include all Eaton students in their school's centennial celebration, each child designed his/her own ceramic tile. Every class visited a make-your-own pottery studio and each grade received artistic direction, an array of ideas, a color palette, and the materials to create their unique artwork. These tiles became part of a permanent installation at school.

Logistics Planning Chart



Please use this chart to guide your own project. Also, make use of the worksheets, student project tips, parent letter, student recruitment flyer --- anything that helps you and your students research your school's history.

| Program Module | Participants | Activities | Outcomes |
|---|--|---|---|
|  Learning about Research | Students Guest Speakers Field Trip Chaperones Teachers Volunteers | Guest speaker presentations Visiting the school library, local library, town/city's public archive Meeting a folk-life specialist or expert to learn basic principles of interviewing | Learning about research -- how to do it, where to find it, and how to make sense of what is discovered Understanding about collecting historical artifacts "informally" from the school and "formally" from local resources-- libraries, archives, museums |
|  Conducting Research | Student Groups Teachers Volunteers | Looking for, gathering, and reviewing artifacts Conducting interviews Developing timelines, charts, and graphs Compiling and organizing data | Learning how to seek, sieve, and synthesize data from books, the Internet, artifacts, interviews, and timelines |
|  Presenting Research Findings | Students Guest Speakers Field Trip Chaperones Teachers Volunteers | Visiting a local museum to view exhibitions and learn about exhibition design Organizing data and findings into an exhibition | Learning how to present research in a meaningful way and design an exhibition |

Logistics Planning Sheet



During the Student Sleuth Project, students (4th grade or older) explore the history of their school. The overarching goal of the project is for them to gain a greater understanding of their school's history by working with professional historians and archivists. In conjunction with this project, students learn how to: undertake research; locate historical resources; conduct interviews; examine their school's history; work in teams; and design an exhibition. The program is divided into three parts: (a) learning about historical resources and locating them; (b) conducting research and compiling evidence; and (c) creating an exhibition that showcases findings.



This form is designed to help organize the program and plan for student meetings. It is recommended to meet at least once a week. Ideally each session would be between 45 minutes to an hour.

Meeting Time

Establish a regular meeting time and location.

Logistics

Find a space in the school where students can gather as a group but also have space to spread out while working on projects. Table and floor space in a classroom, school library, hallway, or cafeteria will work well. If you plan on meeting professionals and visiting other sites, you will need permission slips and money to cover transportation costs. Points of interests may include your school library, a trip to local libraries, town/city archives, history museums, and more. If leaving school proves difficult, invite local professionals into your building. Guest speakers ought to talk about the research process and what they do professionally. Students should be given ample time to converse with them, and these conversations should help them develop research ideas.

Assistance

Recruit a few skillful parents or volunteers to assist with the project. Ideally students will work in small groups, and it is helpful to have one grown up per group or at least an adult to float between 1-2 groups.

Materials

Students will need composition books for writing assignments that may include making journal entries, jotting down notes, creating interview questions, or organizing project ideas. If

interviews with staff and alumni are recorded, students will need access to an audio recorder or video camera.

Once the exhibition portion of the assignment is underway, it is likely students will need large sheets of colored paper, cardboard, foam board, markers, glue, magazines, and photographs. In some instances, students may need to print text and images off computers. Three-dimensional objects should also be considered and generally enhance exhibitions, especially if people are allowed to touch them. Depending upon the project, students may collect natural materials such as plants and leaves. Other three-dimensional objects used to embellish the students' exhibition may include trophies, plaques, artwork, costumes, sports equipment, and building materials (shingles, brick, stone, roof slate).

Vocabulary

The words listed here are often used during this program and therefore should be introduced and defined. They include: sleuth, historian, archivist, folk-life specialist, research, library, archive, artifact, provenance, museum, collage, montage, mock-up, design, and exhibition.

Introductions

Have students introduce themselves and explain why they're participating in this program and what they hope to get out of it.

Student Review of Program

Provide a program overview to the students. Explain that they will be uncovering different aspects of their school's history and will use their findings to create an exhibition to be displayed at their school (or other location). **Mention that the program is divided into three parts: learning and locating resources; conducting and compiling research; and designing and displaying findings.** Outline upcoming field trips and their intended purpose. Explain to the students what their responsibilities will be for the project, which can include:



Journaling: Educators may have students write a journal entry at the end of each session and after field trips to reflect on their experiences. A paragraph consisting of three-four sentences is sufficient.



Additional Assignments Related to their Experiences: Educators may provide preparation materials that reinforce their learning. For example, students will review interview guidelines before conducting an interview.



Final Projects: Students may present their findings using common and inexpensive materials such as foam board, construction paper, markers, and glue. For samples of final projects, refer to [these pictures](#) on the John Eaton website.

Student Brainstorm

Ask students what they want to know about their school and compile their comments. Brainstorm ideas for their research. Some ideas may include:

| | |
|---|--|
|  | Interviewing people about the school--neighbors, relatives, teachers, and alumni. |
|  | Finding photographs including ones students may have at home. |
|  | Creating a timeline--events important to school, region, nation, and world. |
|  | Researching school architecture and pinpointing interesting features. Learning what the building looked like when it was built and how it has changed, inside and out. |
|  | Documenting school musicals, concerts, or special events. |

Sample, First Student Assignment

Ask each student to answer the following:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | What do I want to find out about my school? |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | What is something interesting I already know about my school? |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Who do I want to interview? Include the name of an actual person or an idea "I want to interview someone who was a student here 10 years ago and I want to know about _____." |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | What interests me most about my school? |



Information sheets can be downloaded and used to prepare students for conducting interviews and also for actual interviews.

Sample, Getting Started

Break students into small groups and hand out project assignments (different topics pertaining to the school). Have students brainstorm five questions that they want to know about their particular topic using how, what, why, where, and when. The next step is starting research to find answers – use library books, the Internet, school staff, and other resources nearby that relate to your school.

Student Sleuth Project Flyer



Do you like hearing stories, finding clues, and solving mysteries?



Have you ever wondered what it might have been like to attend your school 25, 50 or 100 years ago?

If you answered “yes!” to these questions, become a Student Sleuth and investigate your school’s history.

As a **Student Sleuth**, you will:



Visit local archives and museums to learn how to conduct research from original documents;



Examine your school to record its artifacts – trophies, paper documents, and photos;



Interview neighbors and alumni to learn about your school’s past; and



Work on compiling information for an exhibition.



This project requires regular meetings that will take place:

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Where: | |
| When: | |
| Sponsor: | |

Parent Permission Form



The school is excited that your child is interested in participating in the Student Sleuth Project. He/she will work with other students, teachers, and professional historians to investigate and research his/her school's rich history. Your child will act as an historian as he/she reviews documents, photographs, books, artifacts, and other items that are linked to his/her school's history.

During this project, students will likely:

-  Visit area archives, libraries, or museums to learn how to conduct research from original documents;
-  Work with librarians and historians at school to examine artifacts, such as trophies, plaques, banners, and photographs;
-  Meet with a folk-life specialist and other professionals to learn how to conduct interviews and oral histories;
-  Interview teachers, neighbors, and alumni to learn what the school was like in the past; and
-  Compile the information for a display or exhibition.

This project is under the supervision of _____ and would begin
_____. It will require meetings with
_____ during
_____.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the school or me/us at

_____.

School Inventory Worksheet



School artifacts such as trophies, banners, pictures, plaques, artwork, costumes, and projects are important tools to helping understand its past. Using this worksheet, walk around your school and make a list of artifacts that you value and deem important. Record them, paying close attention to condition (good, fair, or poor), location, and provenance (where they came from).

| OBJECT | CONDITION | LOCATION | PROVENANCE | WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT? |
|--------|-----------|----------|------------|------------------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Interview Ideas



Name: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____



PICK ONLY ONE IDEA FOR EACH INTERVIEW. COME UP WITH THREE TO FIVE QUESTIONS RELATING TO THAT ONE IDEA.

Suggested Ideas or Topics for an Interview



General Topics and Information: school experience, neighborhood growing up, where he/she grew up – town, city, state, country.



Specific Topics and Information: school plays or events, favorite neighborhood spot or friend, best features of the town where you grew up.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Tips When Interviewing and Recording Someone



Before the Interview

Set up the interview in advance. First, identify who you want to interview. Next, agree upon a meeting time, date, and location. Lastly, determine how long the interview will last. Practice your interview questions with a friend, parent, or in front of a mirror.



During the Interview

Find a quiet place for the interview, and beforehand, check your audio recorder or video camera to make sure it is working.

Once the recorder is on, begin your interview by stating:

- your name and the name of the person you are interviewing;
- where you are (location) and what the date is;
- what the interview is about; and
- ask permission (for example, “May I record/tape this interview?”).

Show respect for your interviewee--be patient and engaged.

Do more listening than talking. Silence is okay.

Never interrupt and always listen very carefully!

Ask one question at a time—start with short uncomplicated questions.

Ask open-ended questions.

“Tell me about.....”

“What’s your experience with.....”

“Recall your fondest memories.....”

If you don’t understand what the interviewee is saying, ask him/her to explain it again in a different way.



**Remember:
Interviewing
Takes Practice!**

Interviewing Dos and Don'ts



| DO | DO NOT |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Set up a quiet space.  Ask permission to record.  Set up the interview: mention names, dates, and topic.  Prepare your questions.  Think before speaking.  Stay still: no fidgeting means quiet hands, feet, and body.  "Listen" with your eyes.  Show respect for any topic.  Respect silence.  Stay on topic. Help interviewee return to your question by gently guiding them back.  Say "THANK YOU"!! | <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Do not talk about yourself.  Do not rush.  Do not interrupt.  Do not appear bored, even if an answer is off topic and of little interest.  Do not bring anything that might be a distraction.  Do not make any noises (no tapping, clicking). These noises will be heard on recordings.  Do not be afraid of silence. Long pauses are okay. |



Notes:

Interviewing Evaluation Sheets: How'd I Do?



Rating System: Please circle a number best fitting your performance.

| | Fair | Good | Very Good | Excellent |
|---|------|------|-----------|-----------|
| Did I set-up the interview properly, with an agreed upon date, attendees, and place? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Were my questions clear? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Did I include open-ended questions? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Was I focused? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Did I avoid fidgeting and interrupting? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| How well were my eyes "listening"? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| How respectful was I? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  Notes: | | | | |

Fact Finding Sheet



Name(s): _____

Location: _____



List two historical facts about your school that you find most interesting. Be sure to include dates.

- 1.
- 2.



List three fun facts about your school that you did not know and find amusing, enjoyable, or entertaining.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



List two facts about your school's neighborhood—include information about streets, buildings, people, or events.

- 1.
- 2.



Write five interesting facts you already know about your school. For example, my school mascot is an eagle.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



Use the information you gathered to write a paragraph to a student considering enrolling at your school. Explain why you think he/she should attend it over other schools. Be sure to include what you like best about your school.



Draw a picture of your school.

Exhibition Checklist



Determine which research to use for your portion of the exhibition and decide the best way to display it. Will you create a vertical or horizontal timeline? Will you design a collage or photo montage? Is your research best represented by graphs and charts? Whichever method you choose, make it interesting. Include words, images, objects, materials, and anything else you think will engage others.

Below is a checklist to help guide you through the exhibition process. Create a mock-up of your ideas before tackling your final project.



Remember, no matter which design style you choose, be sure your display is clear, neat, colorful, and easy to read.

| Exhibition Checklist | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| Do I have a theme/title, and is it well-defined? | | |
| Do I have enough information? | | |
| Do I have too much information? | | |
| Did I include text that is clear and large enough to read? | | |
| Did I include drawings, pictures, or photographs? | | |
| Did I include artifacts? | | |
| Did I include objects to touch or smell or taste? If so, did I include enough or too much? Are they located in a place where young people can see and reach them? | | |
| Is my display colorful? | | |
| Did I document my sources? | | |

Extending the Project School-Wide: School Tile Project



Everyone is interested in their school's history, and while the Student Sleuth History Project is designed for 15-25 students, all students benefit from sharing the experience. As part of your school's historic celebration, everyone can participate in an exciting school-wide project.

A tile project is one idea that enables each student to design his/her own ceramic tile. These unique, signed tiles can become part of a permanent installation displayed at your school. Each class can visit a make-your-own pottery studio, have a company visit your school, or mail away for a do-it-yourself kit through the Internet. Each grade of students will be given artistic direction, an array of ideas, a color palette, and the materials to create their unique artwork.

This activity can be coordinated with the school's art teacher, classroom teachers, a volunteer, parent, or a pottery studio.

Tips for Getting Started:



Contact a local store or company that can supply tiles and paint. The tiles will need to have a matte finish so they can absorb the paint. The tiles will also need to be fired to create a finished product.



Pre-select a range of colors (6-8) so the tiles resemble each other.



Provide each grade level with a theme that the students use to direct their design. Themes that tie into the school's curriculum or site work best. Some examples may include:

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Hand prints with a border of thumb prints | First Grade Playground Activities | Second Grade School Symbols |
| Third Grade Local or National Monuments | Fourth Grade Nature | Fifth Grade Flags Around the World |



Note: For grades three and up, it's a good idea to have students jot down a few ideas on paper and produce a sketch of their artwork before painting directly on the tile.

Sample Tiles from John Eaton Elementary School's Centennial History Project



Pre-K & K: Hand Print



First Grade: Playground Activities



Second Grade: School Symbols



Third Grade: National or Local Monuments



Fourth Grade: Nature



Fifth Grade: Flags of the World

Washington, DC Resources



The following chart provides contacts for anyone seeking more information specifically about John Eaton Elementary School’s centennial history project. It also provides contact information for Washington, DC educators, individuals, and institutions that were instrumental to the Student Sleuth Project.

| Institution | Address | Contact Name | Contact Information |
|---|--|--|---|
| John Eaton Elementary School | 3301 Lowell Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008 | Eileen Langholtz and Michelle Koerner, Eaton Enrichment Coordinators | davideileen@verizon.net and mishboni@aol.com |
| The Sumner School, Washington, DC Public School Museum and Archive | 1201 17 th Street, NW Washington, DC 20036 Farragut North, Metro Red Line | Kimberly Springle, Director/Archivist/ Curator | kimberly.springle@dc.gov |
| The Library of Congress, Jefferson Building | 10 First Street, SE Capitol South, Metro Orange/Blue Lines | Stacie Moats, Educational Resources Specialist Cathy Kerst, Folk-life Specialist/Archivist | smoa@loc.gov cker@loc.gov |
| The National Building Museum | 401 F Street, NW Judiciary Square, Metro Red Line | Cathy Frankel, Director of Exhibitions | cfrankel@nbm.org |

Another resource that has provided tremendous support for this project is the [Washington, DC Humanities Council](#). The John Eaton Home and School Association (HSA), a 501(c)3 entity, applied for and received a \$2,000 [DC Community Heritage Grant](#) through the Humanities Council that allowed us to create the web content for this Student Sleuth Project lesson plan. The due date for this grant application occurs annually in early May, and the grant period runs from June 15 through October 15.