

# The Hometown Heroes: Creating Civic Pride

• **Keep 'em Reading** • by | D. Jackson Maxwell, PhD

Grades  
K-2, 3-5+

While it is vital that students learn to conduct research using print and online sources, the task of teaching research techniques can prove to be both difficult and tedious. But when these skill sets are injected into an exciting, hands-on program, the lessons become more engaging and relevant to students.

The following Hometown Heroes project is designed to provide a framework for utilizing different research techniques, as well as to develop students' library, language arts, creative arts, humanities, technology, and critical thinking skills. The program can be easily tailored to any school's curriculum. Upon completion, the students will have created a high-quality, ever-evolving product that can be used to educate other students and promote their school on a local level and beyond.

## Overall Program Objective

Students will work cooperatively to create an informative book and website celebrating local history.

## Comprehensive Program Objectives

The following is a 10-point list of the Hometown Heroes program's governing objectives.

1. Students will learn to write for an intended audience.
2. Students will research, locate, and collect sources of information for assignments.
3. Students will learn to edit written and visual materials using appropriate software.
4. Students will learn to use digital cameras, scanners, and related technology.
5. Students will be able to organize, lay out, and develop materials into a book format.



6. Students will learn to publish written and visual materials in print and online.
7. Students will learn to use Microsoft Publisher, Print Shop or similar software to publish.
8. Students will load and link their publications to the school or district website.
9. Students will increase their literacy skills by participating in a cross-curriculum project.
10. The school as a whole will benefit by engaging in a project that explores and promotes the community via discovery learning.

## Getting Started

The first step in developing a Hometown Heroes program is to create the curriculum. The school library media specialist can organize and facilitate this thematic unit by developing lesson plans with classroom teachers that include reading, writing, artwork, field explorations, discovery learning, research, and presentations that culminate in a body of work available in online and print versions.

Hometown Heroes can be used with students K-12; in various capacities, students of all ages can

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be taught to work cooperatively to create a book and website focusing on local history. For example, intermediate through high school students are able to conduct online research locating information to develop educational materials based on local dignitaries or events. These materials might detail an individual's contributions to the community, or events that impact it. At the same time, primary teachers can be enlisted to have students submit drawings and simple activities to augment the older students' work. Librarians can further support teachers by making available appropriate technological resources (websites, historical DVDs, etc.), as well as subject- and grade level-appropriate research materials.

### The Lesson

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Students begin the Hometown Heroes program by taking a tour of the city, collecting data, and taking field notes. Classes go on guided walking or bus tours of the city and its surroundings. The tours are lead by a local historian, a knowledgeable docent, or a school librarian. The guide introduces and explains the importance of street and place names, buildings, architecture, statues, and historic plaques. Other field trips can be taken to area museums, historic sites, and cemeteries to gain a more in-depth understanding of the people and events that shaped local history and culture. Students should be prepared to take field notes and digital photographs/movies, and should be ready to ask questions of the guides and other persons of note whom they encounter. Based on these experiences and interactions, students should then choose a person or topic to research.



Upon choosing a research subject, students in intermediate grades and above conduct research on this topic via the Internet, books, and periodicals. Students write and print out a one-page bibliographic history of their topic, and develop an accompanying instructional game (i.e., word search, crossword puzzle, word scramble, etc.) using appropriate software (i.e. puzzlemaker. discoveryeducation.com). Students in grades K–3, with assistance from their teachers, take photographs, download graphic art, draw and collect pictures to be used in conjunction with upper grade students' bibliographic instructional pages. One picture is selected as the cover illustration for the book and website. Primary student also create coloring pages and connect the dot games to serve as stand-alone activities. With assistance from the art teacher, all students lay out and merge the biographies, histories, games, and pictures into information-rich, instructional pages. These pages are bound into a book and used as the basis for an informative, aesthetically-pleasing website. To provide uniformity among the pages and ultimately, between the book and the website, the librarian develops a template for all entries using Microsoft publisher or similar software. The pictures and activities are scanned and manipulated to fit a predetermined format. Once complete, the Hometown Heroes project is loaded onto the school or district website and printed in book form. This unit can be integrated into a 6- to 9-week instructional period, dovetailing with both the social studies and library curriculums.

### Benefits for Students

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The Hometown Heroes program challenges students to think creatively and critically across the curriculum. Benefits include improving students' English and Language Arts skills; learning to use technology such as digital cameras, data processing, scanning/inserting graphics; and introducing them to website development. The project supports a social studies curriculum by actively engaging students in researching the history of their community. The knowledge acquired from this research makes students more

aware of their responsibilities as citizens, and better prepared to succeed academically. Finally, the Hometown Heroes program is unique in its inclusiveness; it can incorporate work from Kindergartners to high school seniors. The results of the program are tactile and visual materials that learners of all ages can be proud of: a book and website that can be used by their peers, teachers, community members, and interested persons worldwide.



## Evaluation and Assessment

The effectiveness of the program is determined by the students' ability to successfully publish and distribute their product to their intended audience. Further, the quality of artwork, games, and writing allows teachers to assess student learning. Stakeholders' comments, emails and number of hits on the website will provide additional information on how well the publications have been received. Quantitative evaluations such as report cards and local, state and national writing and language arts competency tests should be compared pre- and post- implementation to note changes.

## Funding: Who Will Help?

As for program costs, the Hometown Heroes program is flexible. Actual costs depend on a number of controllable factors. These include the number of students selected to participate, the cost of field trips, the available resources versus resources to be purchased, and the number of books printed. (Such considerations should be taken into account by facilitators early on, while plans for implementation are being made.)

Fortunately, when it comes to funding, the Hometown Heroes program sells itself. Donations can be solicited from local businesses, historical societies, foundations, private individuals, parent-teacher associations, municipal or state government organizations, national endowments, nonprofits, educational charities, and the list goes on. Be creative and improvise when seeking funding. Remember that the scope of Hometown

Heroes includes education, writing, grammar, language arts, technology, art, history, cultural studies, civics, etc. A group that supports anyone of these subjects can be approached for funding. Finally, give funding agencies credit on the book and website—this provides them positive publicity while publicly acknowledging their generosity.

## Conclusion: Self-Esteem and Civic Pride

Hometown Heroes is an ongoing, innovative program designed to provide a scaffold for students of all ages to implement and strengthen their research skills in a cross-curricular project. The end result is an informative website that showcases students' outstanding abilities, and provides a global audience with insight into local history.

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*D. Jackson Maxwell, PhD is a National Board Certified Teacher, Information Specialist for Memphis City Schools, freelance writer, and education consultant. He has received numerous awards including ING's Unsung Heroes Award for creative programming, Rotary Academic Teacher of Excellence Award, and Memphis Business Journal's Top 40 Under 40 Award for community education. He has previously published hundreds of articles in books, magazines, newspapers, journals, and regularly speaks at library and education conferences. Contact him at [djacksonmaxwell@gmail.com](mailto:djacksonmaxwell@gmail.com).*