



in partnership with



# LEARNING WHY AMERICA?

A Special Initiative for our Nation's Capitol Charter School Students and Teachers



## THE CITY OF WASHINGTON IS RICH IN HISTORY,

and the landmarks abound. One can live a lifetime in DC and not have ever seen or heard of many of the events in history that make it our nation's capital, and which can instill a newfound sense of activism among its people. The story of this nation may have unfolded in many states, but Washington DC was and is the pivotal place that retains a link to history and a lesson for how to change the course of history when necessary.

Why America? was started by the Center for Education Reform (CER), a group whose 25 year history began in Washington DC and was instrumental in bringing about the charter school movement here and nationwide. CER collaborated with FOCUS-DC to create experiential learning come alive for mainly middle school students in charters. Why charters? Because you are more able to tailor your work to the needs of students, you have the flexibility to accommodate new and different learning opportunities and are not stifled by as much bureaucracy as our friends in the traditional system.

We have identified places that students may never have gone, found and developed content that might help make some issues come alive and spark some curiosity as they learn and grow. We cannot and will not claim to understand or know how to teach your charter school students - that is not our expertise. But we can help expand their horizons, drive interest and engagement and help you help them become the revolutionaries of the future the way our founders were the revolutionaries of the past.

And so this brief newsletter is designed to introduce or reintroduce you to what we are doing, what we have done, and what we hope you will help us achieve. While we may only be in one small city now, we are hopeful that asking Why America? in every city will drive more knowledge, more understanding, and more appreciation of civil society and American history, instilling in young people an understanding of what it means to be an American.

## WHY AMERICA? THE ELECTIONS



In December, CER hosted the kick-off event for the yearlong Why America? initiative. Why America? The Election was held at President Lincoln's Cottage, where over 300 DC public charter school students from 10 schools came together to learn about and celebrate American democracy. Students were able to engage with Representative Luke Messer of Indiana and Paul Mitchell of Michigan, as they shared stories from their backgrounds and their thoughts about civic duty and service. Students also heard from US Marine veteran Michael Desmond, representing the Travis Manion Foundation, about the importance of building character. And what better place than the beautiful and historic Lincoln's Cottage for students to reflect on the importance of strong character and civic engagement!



## HOW IT WORKS

We create themes and locate interesting and historic venues in the Capital. But beyond hosting events we equip District charter schools with financial and logistical support and other incentives to help their students participate in "Why America?" We solicited teacher and school leader input very early on and learned that if we take care of transportation, be sure to feed the kids and create engaging, relevant and interesting programs, you all will participate. We are regularly surveying teachers to get feedback and learn.

## DON'T MISS FEB 26 WHY AMERICA? THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY AND THE WOMEN WHO PRESERVED IT

Just around the corner this February 26th will be an unprecedented field trip for DC charter students. With 1,000 students and their teachers and chaperones getting ready to attend, this next event is sure to open up minds and provide new lessons to your students and schools. Held at the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Constitution Hall, the program will include exciting interpreters from the days of Washington, thanks to Mt. Vernon's education team. Your students will learn about the first African American poetess, the role women played in demanding equal rights for all in our new nation, and possibly even hear from President Washington, George himself. Martha may well also put in an appearance and share her memories of George, Mt. Vernon, the Revolution and after.

There will be music, a chance for students to play colonial instruments and engage actively in the program. We are thrilled to have Nia Imani Franklin joining us, Miss America 2019 and Miss DC 2019 Allison Farris, as well as "learning stations" about pivotal events in Washington's life.

Transportation will be provided and students will leave with a fabulous lunch.

## TEACHER RESOURCES

CER also makes available unique resources to help you prepare your class to have the ultimate experience. If you are signed up these will automatically be sent to you. If not, please write [events@edreform.com](mailto:events@edreform.com) and we will be sure to share!

## HOW TO MAKE SURE YOU ARE INVOLVED

It's easy. If you want to have a school – yours or some other charter – participate or you'd like to help us broaden the reach of "Why America?" in this and upcoming "Why America?" days, write us at [events@edreform.com](mailto:events@edreform.com) or call 202-750-0016 and ask for Marina Lazar.

And a special note to teachers. "Why America?" is meant as a teaching aide and help to you. We welcome – and need – your input and support. Please feel free to contact us at any time about any aspect of the program.

## WHY "WHY AMERICA?" IS IMPORTANT

We couldn't possibly come up with a better answer to that question than the one provided by Pulitzer Prize winning historian and author David McCullough, who said "you cannot love what you do not know". Our hope is that in some small way we help students know and love America - and work to make it the country they need and want!

# WHY AMERICA? THE ORIGINS OF MONEY & ALEXANDER HAMILTON (JAN, 2019)

Planned in honor of Alexander Hamilton's birthday, we set out to mix a bit of economics with American history. The venue was the historic Anderson House, a gilded-age (built in 1905) mansion on Embassy Row that is the longtime headquarters of The Society of the Cincinnati. The Society is the nation's oldest patriotic organization, founded in 1783 by officers of the Continental Army (Hamilton was its second President) and their French counterparts, Anderson House contains the Society's extensive library and museum.



More than 300 students participated across two sessions. They were first introduced to a history of the Anderson House by Jack Warren who said that in this nation "I have a job and you have a job, and that's to make sure we are all free. That's what being an American is all about.". Then they were introduced to precisely who Alexander Hamilton was by Lawrence Staten, Chair of the History Department at Washington Latin Charter School

Gina Cappel Pack, producer of the highly acclaimed film "Discovering George Washington" showed clips from her award winning documentary "Rediscovering Hamilton". After a lively Q & A with Pack, the students broke into groups of 25-30 for a series of interactive "learning stations" exploring the historic artifacts, museum and library of Anderson House.

These included lessons on Hamilton's finance legacy and his influence on the Treasury, his on-again, off-again relationship with George Washington, and a history of the Society of Cincinnati and Hamilton's role in founding and guiding it in its early years.



The finale of the day was a reconvening in the grand ballroom for discussion where the kids shared something new they learned or didn't know before. This was a fascinating way to end the program and hear directly from the students. The kids were all given box lunches and "national school choice week" scarves as they left, hopefully with full stomachs and minds.



## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

CER embarks on its second quarter century as the leading national voice advocating for change and innovation in education. We fight to give learners at all levels, K-career, all ages, all zip codes and all economic circumstances the opportunity to shape their education to suit their needs, not the needs of a moribund education establishment. Learn more about us and our programs at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com)

For more information about CER, please contact [cer@edreform.com](mailto:cer@edreform.com).

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Diana with Congressman Paul Mitchell