

Things Mom and Dad should know about National History Day

Dear Parents,

Because your child has expressed an interest in the National History Day program, it is important that you know what is entailed in this annual competition. Peters Township has been actively involved in this program since its inception in the early 1980s, fielding hundreds of contestants. As a matter of fact, Peters Township has a longstanding reputation for quality National History Day entries. The program requires quite a commitment on the part of your son or daughter, one which will also have an impact on you as a parent. For that reason, this informational overview has been provided to better familiarize you with this ambitious venture.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Bowman

National History Day Adviser, Grade 6/HS
Peters Township School District

An Overview of the Program

National History Day encourages students in grades six through twelve to research a topic related to an annual theme, and then present their findings in the form of an historical paper, exhibit, documentary, or performance. History comes alive as their research leads them to personal interviews, newspaper and manuscript collections, family letters and photographs, as well as archives, libraries, and historical sites. On a Saturday in early March, participants gather for the regional competition at the Heinz History Center where their entries are presented and judged. The winning entries proceed to the state contest held each May in central/eastern Pennsylvania. From there, the finalists compete in the national competition held in June at the University of Maryland's College Park Campus, near Washington, D.C.

The Rules of the Competition

Each National History Day participant can access the Contest Guide detailing the rules for each category of the competition. It also describes what the judges will be looking for as they critique an entry. Students should familiarize themselves this guide as well as the resources available on the National History Day website at NHD.org.

Contest Divisions and Categories

The competition is divided into two divisions. Entries in each division are judged separately at all levels of the contest. The divisions are:

Junior Division – Grades 6-7-8

Senior Division – Grades 9-10-11-12

Students may enter **one** of nine categories. They should choose a category in which they can make the best use of their special abilities and talents and best showcases the topic they have chosen. They may work by themselves or in a group of up to five members. Each category is judged separately. The categories are:

Exhibit
Documentary
Performance
Website Design
Historical Paper (individual only)

Choosing a Topic

With many History Day themes, the best materials and the most rewarding topics may come from the surrounding community and its history. However, students may also pursue topics dealing with state, national, and world history. Students should refrain from events that have occurred in the past 25 years since historians may not have had adequate time to reflect on the significance of such events. Contestants should also narrow the scope of a topic by asking questions such as:

- How does this topic relate to my surroundings, my experiences, and my interests?
- How can this topic allow me explore something I've always wanted to investigate?

An ideal topic is one that:

- Truly interests the student.
- Has abundant resources (especially first-hand information known as **primary sources**).
- Can be researched and presented within the limits of time and space stipulated in the rules.
- Clearly relates to the annual theme.
- Can best be presented in the category chosen by the student.

As parents, you will find that the most impactful topic may be one for which your student can conduct an in-person interview with someone who was affected (even if that person isn't a primary source).

Expenses

The Peters Township School District has made a substantial commitment to financing the National History Day program for interested students. For every student competing in the state and national contests, PTSD makes partial reimbursement for lodging expenses and underwrites the entry fees.. In addition, PTSD does not ask the parents to underwrite the fees and expenses of the mentor/coach.

Students and their parent can expect to incur expenses for which they will be personally responsible, such as transportation to competitions, meals, and sharing a portion of the cost of lodging at the state and national contests. Additional expenses will involve visits to libraries, historic sites, and interviews. Parents should also budget \$100 for the purchase of resources which may be unavailable through libraries (and which many students treasure as part of their adult libraries).

When it comes time to organize their information into an entry for the contest, further expenses will depend on the category chosen by the student. Those who prepare exhibits can expect to spend money on the display panels, matting, adhesives, lettering, and photography. Those preparing performances can expect to spend money preparing costumes and props, while those engaged in developing documentaries will find themselves paying for online movies programs and recording equipment that will allow them to create their movies.

In spite of these expenses, students should keep in mind that it is not the degree of glitz that convinces judges that an entry is deserving of recognition; rather it is the caliber of the historical research.

A Commitment of Time

While most History Day veterans start their work during the summer, some students will select their topics in October and conduct their research during the fall and winter months. Before the winter ends, they will have organized their entry, making sure it is ready for the March competition – website and historical paper entries are due in February. Students who participate in this program must be self-motivated. They must be able to budget their time and resources effectively. Each will be provided with a calendar for completion, stating the dates by which each step of their entry should be finished. Student will want to select topics that will maintain their interest over a seven-month period. Participants spend a great deal of time poring through the resources of local libraries, making phone calls, writing letters, and conducting interviews. The nature of this research requires that students complete their work outside of school, generally on weekends.

Those who plan to work within a group should be mindful of potential schedule conflicts with their partners. They should select partners who are dependable and good-natured. There are no parent coaches for National History Day, nor does the adviser assign students to particular groups. Students either work independently or with individuals they have personally chosen. Although the rules allow groups of up to five, experience has shown that groups of two or three are better. The logistics and personalities of larger groups are often difficult.

Skills Acquired

National History Day is time well spent. Your students will gain research and writing skills, learning how to drill down through sources to the originals and how to organize, evaluate, and prioritize information. Through the judging process, your students will gain experience in public speaking, thinking on their feet, and handling constructive criticism. NHD alumni return year after year to tell of the ease with which they conducted research, completed bibliographies, and defended theses with the skills they gained from National History Day. And NHD is a great way to combat summer brain-drain.

Parent Participation

Parents can play a significant role in the National History Day program, without unduly becoming involved in the preparation of an entry. While the focus must always remain on *student*-acquired skills and *student*-acquired information, parents, can play a limited role by:

- Providing encouragement for their child's efforts.
- Helping keep their child on schedule.
- Demonstrating how to conduct research at local libraries.
- Demonstrating how to use equipment necessary to the construction on an entry, such as a camera or power tools.
- Proofreading written materials.
- Providing transportation to libraries, interview sites, archives, and historic sites.
- Providing a work area for their child for the duration of the contest.
- Making their home available as a meeting place for students preparing a group entry.
- Attending the competitions.
- Arranging transportation and lodging at the state and national competitions.

The Adviser

The adviser has a number of responsibilities, some of which include:

- Introducing students to the program – its theme, the dates or the contest, and the rules.
- Making arrangements for our participation in the regional, states, and national contests.
- Preparing the budget for the program.
- Fielding students' questions personally or via e-mail.
- Judging at the state competition, so adviser will generally not be available once the state competition begins.

If a parent or student has questions regarding the program, Mrs. Bowman can be reached at **724-941-1532** or via e-mail at rbowmanesq@aol.com. **If you are interested, please contact Mrs. Bowman as soon as possible to get started.**