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# Education

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## Writing History

The ways schools are teaching children about September 11

by Jennifer Merritt

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Most of us will never forget the attacks of September 11, 2001. But for many of the kids born after that terrible day, or who were too young to remember it, "9-11" is a vague term. For [families](#) affected by the tragedy, the idea that generations would grow up without learning the lessons from that day and what it meant to our country is upsetting, given the pledge to "never forget."



Now, some September 11 families are pushing schools to include the event's history as part of the curriculum for kids from kindergarten through high school, starting with a series of pilot education programs across the country to teach [children](#) about the attacks and their aftermath.

Writing history so soon after an event is never easy, particularly when it comes to something like September 11, where everyone has different ideas on what lessons we should learn, both from the attacks and the nation's response to them. There are the questions of what to teach a 5-year-old versus a 15-year-old; how to teach without bias or prejudice; and how to teach children that they can effect change in the world.

### For Teachers

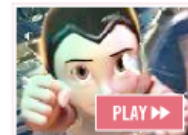
And given the diversity of today's classrooms, another goal of these programs is to get teachers to feel more comfortable addressing the events of September 11, which can be tricky on several levels.

"We're not preaching, we're not advocating, we're instead encouraging students to look at several points of view and clarify their own views, and give them the tools to be active citizens, like how to write a letter to the editor or how to advocate for an elected official," explains Michael Krasner, co-director of the Taft Institute for Government and associate professor of political science at City University of New York's Queens College.

Krasner, who along with his colleague Jack Zevin and the [September 11th Education Trust](#), developed a curriculum for middle and high school students that is being taught for the first time this year at schools in such states as New York, California, Alabama and Kansas. Much of the material, which Krasner says focuses on civic participation, stems from interviews with survivors, first responders and politicians, like Rudy Giuliani, New York's mayor at the time, and Hillary Clinton, who was a New York state senator at the time of the attacks.



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"When you're writing curriculum, you have to be thinking about it strategically," he explains. "You can't do that if you're feeling in awe of someone because she was so composed and brave, or bowled over by something someone did on the 87th floor to free someone from a stack of collapsed dry wall. You've got to deal with your own emotional reaction. You have to read these transcripts without having your own feelings."

**Share your thoughts on these pilot education programs below. For Students**

Meanwhile, in October, 12 New Jersey schools will pilot a classroom curriculum for elementary, middle and high schools students entitled, "Learning from the Challenges of Our Time: Global Security, Terrorism, and 9/11 in the Classroom." The curriculum uses age-appropriate content and resource materials to look at September 11 as a case study for what happens when people disagree and try to hurt other individuals.

"What we have found is that teachers, especially in the lower grades, were not really teaching it," says Paul B. Winkler, executive director of the [New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education](#), an organization that partnered with the nonprofit [Families of September 11](#) and the [Liberty Science Center](#) in Jersey City, NJ in creating the curriculum. "In the upper grades, they were having a memorial day or a moment of silence. We're trying to broaden that. Not just remember it, but do something about it."

That means creating an actionable program so that students can spot all facets of terrorism—whether its a catastrophic event or bullying on the playground—and do something about it.

"With the little ones, obviously we're not going to be talking about terrorism," says Donna Gaffney, a Families of September 11 advisory board member. "All content will be developmentally appropriate, so for elementary school students, we might talk about what is a hero? There are a couple of books that we're using, like [New York's Bravest](#) and [Hope Was Here](#). We have over 150 lesson plans and the plan is that children realize that everyone can make a contribution and help others."

**For Parents**

Should such programs go nationwide, they would be a welcome addition to the classroom for some parents; not so much for others. "I think it's critical that each generation be reminded that war is not just speeches and dates and who won, who lost," says iVillager lj\_jacieb. "The idea that the Price of [Freedom](#) is the Cost of War shouldn't be a vague notion. We need to understand what we lost that day, what policies changed, and how our lives are still affected by 9-11 to this day."

"I believe this program will fill a real educational need," says Bob Barnett, iVillage health director, a New York City resident and father of Emily, 13, whose friend lost a father in the attacks that day, at age 5. "My daughter asked me, 'Why did they do this to us?' That's not an easy question to answer at all...I hope this new curriculum finds a way to do that. In New York City in the weeks and months after the attack, there was terrible sadness, but also a communal solidarity, a sense that we can stand together in a kind of defiant love for our way of life. Perhaps programs like this will help us communicate to our children the human values of openness and compassion and tolerance that separate us from terrorists."

**Share your thoughts on these pilot education programs below.** Other parents are weary of such curricula. "[Dear son] had just turned 9 when it happened; he didn't sleep well and was devastated and terrified for about nine months afterwards. I'm not sure he'd want to be reminded at school. He's well aware of what happened," says iVillage community member suzyk2118.

"I doubt the curriculum mentions what I think the real lesson of 9/11 is: That a powerful country's citizens can be hoodwinked to the extent that they let fewer than 50 people determine a nation's path for the next 10 years, bankrupting it both morally and financially in the process," says iVillager muddymessalonskee.

**For Children**

For Mary Ellen Salamone, such issues are exactly why she saw the need for a program like the one developed by Families of September 11: It's all about context, and understanding why we are the way we are as nation now.

"There were a lot of questions from teachers and parents of whether there should be some sort of standard over what was taught," says the past president and current advisory board member for Families of September 11, who lost her husband in the attacks on New York when her children were 6, 4 and 2 years old. "In history, it's hard to teach about something that just happened. It's hard to teach the Holocaust without teaching about World War II, and how do you do it so that you don't have children coming out of the classroom not liking Germans?"

She continues, "So it became important to us for children to understand that they are not isolated in war, and once they understand that there are incidents of terrorism all throughout history, they are able to understand what terrorism is."

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Salamone also believes there needs to be an actionable aspect of the curriculum, so that a 10-, 14- or 17-year-old, can ask themselves, "What can I do about this?"

This may be a question children of parents who died in September 11 already have asked themselves. Those children don't need a history book or a special curriculum to remember—their life story is history. But for the rest of their generation, that day—and the feeling of civic duty it created—may be fading all too fast.

**Share your thoughts on these pilot education programs below.**

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Posted by Leeza  
6:07 AM

This is such an important story. 9/11 needs to be in the history books or to combat the fear and paranoia and hate that happened after the attacks.

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