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My Fellow Americans…A Trip through American History using Presidential Inaugural Addresses

“The Idea of America”

In teaching third graders history, it is important to make the past seem real, not some abstract set of facts that are read from books or heard from the adults in their lives. Students need to find a way to make connections to their own lives and the events that are occurring today, as one day these experiences will be woven into the history of America.

It is important to develop a unit that is aligned with the district Social Studies Curriculum. During this unit I will spotlight the following standards: *History Standard One; “Students are expected to develop an understanding of the similarities between people now and in the past.* And *History Standard Two; Students should gather, examine, and analyze historical data to gather information about the past.* In addition to Social Studies Standards, I will be creating a unit that brings in our English/ Language Arts Standards as well.

Concentrating on standard two, students will be reading and analyzing the Inaugural Addresses of the United States Presidents. The inaugural address is not mandated by the U S Constitution however our first president, George Washington, decided to felt he had a duty to show his appreciation and gratitude to the nation. Since our country and government were just being formed, no one knew what would lead to a tradition. Since Adams and the other of our early presidents followed Washington’s lead, current presidents now feel bound to make an inaugural address. Most presidents reveal what they believe will be the overarching theme on their presidency during this address. We can learn a little more about the current president based on which prior addresses and presidents he respects and chooses to emulate.

The president of the United States is often called “the most powerful person in the world”. There have been 44 men who have held this position and they have been charged with taking care that the laws of our country be faithfully executed. The president is in-directly elected by the people and so it can be said that the issues and ideas of this person makes him desirable and electable. As the nation formed and developed, issues of expansion and the search for a better life for immigrants were of importance. Today issues of immigration are still prevalent, however with terrorism and illegal immigrants gaining significance, the focus has shifted to trying to determine ways to control it. These are just a few topics that will help us to create a timeline through the centuries of how the idea of America has changed.

My third grade classroom has students with a variety of reading levels ranging from first grade levels to fourth grade levels and perhaps beyond. It is my intention to scaffold vocabulary and comprehension instruction in order to provide an entry point for all learners. Many of the inaugural addresses are lengthy so I will choose significant portions to investigate. I will provide the original text and modified versions and allow students to develop interpretations of these addresses. Vocabulary activities will play a large role in dissecting and analyzing the message embedded in the speeches. Students will work in cooperative learning groups comprised of students with a variety of levels of ability and learning styles. A variety of activities will be used to improve the understanding of the texts. Each team member will be held responsible for learning about the subject matter and for helping the other member learn as well. This mutual support creates an atmosphere where all students can achieve and fosters a strong sense of community within the classroom.

Researching and investigating all forty-four presidents will prove to be too large of a task so we will choose a representational sampling of presidents. Any teacher can choose a sampling of presidents based on their specific needs or desires. I will choose presidents from a variety of centuries to create a snapshot through time. Also, any president that was elected to multiple terms will have only one inaugural address reviewed. I will try to select addresses made during turbulent times as well as steadier periods to try to provide a broad view. A small group (2 to 3 students) will be assigned two inaugural addresses by presidents from two varying centuries in order to compare/contrast the messages. After students research and interpret the initial addresses, groups will be re-formed and students will in turn teach the new members about the addresses they have studied. This will enable the students begin to create a mental timeline of change through the centuries. As a culminating activity, we will create a large timeline detailing important details and will aid the development of narratives explaining how these details have added to and formed the idea of America. It will be interesting to view how each student interprets the data and justifies their thesis.

My concern lies in trying to determine how much background information on each of the selected presidents will be needed. Also, how should this information be presented to the students? Another concern is the actual selection of inaugural addresses that will be used. Will I be able to provide enough variety of individuals as well as important issues to adequately portray a changing America? I trust that these concerns will be vetted out through me research.