

Sagamore and Bill Bennett Team Up for Civic Education



As a conventional think tank, ideas are our business. Yet at Sagamore Institute, we're unconventional in our methodology. We're not removed from reality, and we don't hypothesize from 30,000 feet. We're committed to transforming innovative ideas into real results. We combine the power of new thinking with effective action to transform our neighborhoods, communities, and nation—one idea at a time.

Improving education and strengthening citizenship are primary missions of Sagamore Institute. So it was a great honor for us to be invited by former U.S. Education Secretary William J. Bennett to be his partner in restoring excellence in U.S. history education. Dr. Bennett wants to transform the classroom to build “the good citizen” through an endeavor called Team HOPE (History Opens Eyes), which promotes a new history education model in American schools. This initiative is raising awareness about the essential nature of civic education while taking corrective steps to increase historical literacy, which has waned in recent years.

These days, many high schools have exchanged instruction about the American Revolution for global studies. This means that in classrooms across America today, instruction about our nation's founding starts—and ends—in the lower grades. And like any other subject we learn, without constant reinforcement, knowledge of American history fades over time.

When was the last time you caught your teenager staying up past bedtime with a flashlight under the covers reading a history textbook? Well, the great American story is that engaging. We should tell it that way.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assesses student understanding of the development of America's democratic institutions and ideals. Recent results indicate that American students score worse in U.S. history than any other tested subject area. While many of us are aware of the underperformance of students in science, mathematics, and language arts, the NAEP assessment suggests an even bleaker picture of “American Amnesia” suffered by our youth: the longer students stay in school, the less they know about our history.

As a longtime educator, Dr. Bennett understands that traditional encyclopedia-style history texts are rarely read for understanding; instead, they are too often used for rote memorization of facts and figures. They are boring and suffer from what some have called the “mentioning syndrome”—the who, what, where, and when—that is devoid of context. In some cases, the content is so minimal that the history of World War II is covered in a few pages.

Dr. Bennett has responded to this crisis in U.S. history education. His landmark two-volume series *America: The Last Best Hope* breaks convention to “recapture the glory” and the “conviction about American greatness and purpose.” Widely renowned as one of America's best storytellers, Dr. Bennett's textbooks are written as an engaging and interesting narrative, rather than an analytical study. The content is fresh and exciting to readers. Stories about historical figures are humorous and engaging, hooking students on subject matter and promoting an interest in lifelong learning.

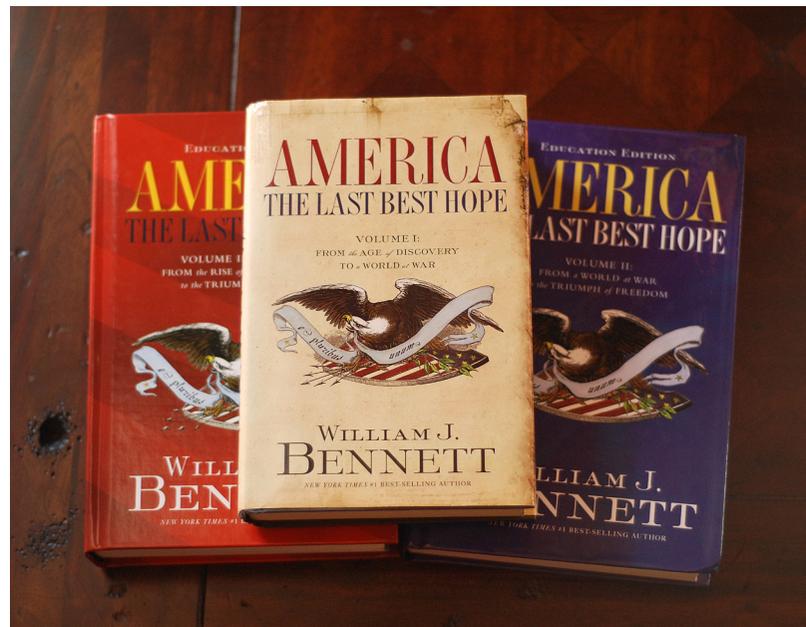
Dr. Bennett tapped Sagamore Institute Senior Fellow Dr. Rex Bolinger to serve as executive director of Team HOPE. A former Indiana Principal of the Year, Dr. Bolinger led a team of his fellow Milken Educator Award recipients in the Team HOPE initiative, which creates and promotes curricular materials tied to Dr. Bennett's narrative. Team HOPE's signature product is the *Road-map to America*, a package of lesson plans, enrichment classroom activities, student guides, and a compilation of trusted links inviting students to engage in more in-depth study of American history.

These Internet-based resources are a departure from conventional print textbooks. They offer the teachers and students cutting-edge, dynamic, and interactive resources that cannot be offered in print. Over 1,000 prescreened links are offered, and they have been organized into libraries on particular subjects. Digital books are also available to students.

The key student component of the *Roadmap* is a dynamic website including interactive maps and thematic audio podcasts from Dr. Bennett himself, which provide background information and offer captivating stories to complement the content in the textbooks. Study aids, including key terms, topics, events, and biographies of historical figures, assist students in organizing, learning, and retaining the material in preparation for state and national standardized tests. Plays engage students in active, participatory learning, allowing them to feel as if they were present during important historical events.

Improving educational resources for both teachers and students of history and social studies is one strategy to improving the knowledge of rising generations. To accomplish this, Team HOPE loaded the *Roadmap* with essays, discussion topics, plays, graphical timelines, PowerPoint presentations, lesson plans, and examinations tailored for educators.

Higher standards must also be part of the equation. The state of Indiana has become the leading implementer of Dr. Bennett's textbooks and beneficiary of Team HOPE's resources. In the fall of 2008, the Indiana State Board of Education called for a "deeper review" to find textbooks that "bring history and other social studies to life." The following year, the State Board announced that *The Last Best Hope* was the only history textbook that enhanced student interest in history. Approximately 20 Indiana schools and districts have adopted the text and curriculum.



Improving educational resources for students of history and social studies is one strategy to improving the knowledge of rising generations.

As globalization marches on, American students must be prepared to compete in a worldwide, twenty-first-century knowledge economy. Equally as important, they must also be equipped to represent the America Idea to the world. To be effective ambassadors for democracy, they must have much more than what professional historian and author David McCullough describes as a vague memory of American history. They must have a meaningful understanding of our nation's vital foundational tenets.

Thanks to Dr. Bennett's artful prose and Team HOPE's expert educational materials, America's educators are better prepared to teach the next generation to become good citizens. This not only helps ensure our own nation's survival, but it also continues to shine a beacon for our global neighbors who lack the most basic freedoms. Restoring excellence in U.S. history education and promoting an informed citizenry are twin engines furthering a twenty-first-century democracy agenda. Sagamore remains committed to furthering this cause.